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IN OPPOSITION,

Tho' losses, and crosses,
Be lessons right severe.
There's wit there, ye'll get there,
Ye'll find nae other where.

BURNS.

“But out of her griefs and cares, as will happen, I think, when these trials fall upon a kindly heart and are not too unbearable, grew up a number of thoughts and excellences which had never come into existence had not her sorrow and misfortunes engendered them.”—ESMOND.

IN OPPOSITION

BY

GERTRUDE M. IRELAND BLACKBURNE

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

WARD AND DOWNEY

12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, LONDON

1888

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Recommencez toujours ! ni trêve, ni remords.
Allez, recommencez, veillez, et sans relâche
Roulez votre rocher, refaites votre tâche.

VICTOR HUGO.

TO

J. S. AND TO K. P. S.

This Sketch

IN MEMORY OF 1883—1888

I trust in nature for the stable laws
Of beauty and utility. Spring shall plant
And autumn garner to the end of time :
I trust in God—the right shall be the right
And other than the wrong, while He endures ;
I trust in my own soul, that can perceive
The outward and the inward, nature's good,
And God's : so, seeing these men and myself,
Having a right to speak thus do I speak.

A Soul's Tragedy.—BROWNING

IN OPPOSITION.

Book III.—Consequences—*continued.*

CHAPTER VII.

THE FRUIT OF HIS LABOURS.

“There was an hour
When, in the firelight steadily aglow,
Joined slackly, we beheld the chasm grow
Among the clicking coals. Our library-bower
That eve was left to us.”

George Meredith.

THE two men turned, half-consciously to watch the graceful white figure with its trailing draperies as it went down the long library. It smiled as it left them together. Wordsworth had started to follow her, but Carstairs seemed to detain him, and the door remained open when she had passed

out. Carstairs strode afterwards to shut it heavily.

He returned, ponderously and ponderingly.

Wordsworth stood, back to fire, with his great figure upright and his large head a little forward. His face wore a look of alertness, and his eyes were lit with the brightness of the thinker's as yet uncommunicated previsions. To Carstairs he spoke in those decided full tones so well known, but with an easy friendly manner which in public, unfortunately, is not always a second nature with Paul Wordsworth.

"I hear that you knew nothing of my coming. It is partly on business, but of that—if you allow me—I would rather speak after eating. I have had a terribly hard day. You have the house full?"

Carstairs curtly mentioned the names of his guests. A little extra ungraciousness did not show upon him, and Paul was too preoccupied to remark that his comrade was abnormally sulky.

"Perhaps we might as well dress at once?"

"Yes, they will be out of the dining-room by that time, unless you like to catch them up as you are."

"Not unless you wish it. I am at your disposal."

"What you please," rejoined Carstairs dully.

Believing what he did, he ought probably then to have told Wordsworth that Temple was no place for him, but, seeing Paul suddenly, the instincts of subservience and the force of association held their own.

Carstairs could not make up his mind what to do. Short of sharp measures, he must, for the present, take Wordsworth at his own valuation. Wordsworth seemed in excellent spirits, scarcely tempered by the sense of bodily fatigue which so often had balked his enjoyment and his activity. For over-tired men, therefore, at their *tête-à-tête* supper they were sufficiently talkative or at least not remarkably silent. Afterwards, to put off the evil day, when Wordsworth asked to return to the library, Carstairs suggested the drawing-room.

“I must see you alone to-night; but you look more tired out than I am,” said Wordsworth to Carstairs.

“I’m all right,” answered Carstairs. “Then we won’t go into the drawing-room?”

“Oh! yes. Only I must see you later.

In fact I would rather put it off and change the current of thought for a short time."

"I'm sure I would," said Carstairs with eagerness, which Paul could not understand, knowing that Carstairs had as yet no idea of what *he* had to say. Carstairs also had been startled by Paul's lightness of tone—for, of course, they were at cross purposes; and yet, as often happens to the preoccupied, each found that the other's unconnected phrases seemed most relevant to his own thoughts.

Carstairs watched Wordsworth with his wife; the presence of Paul seemed to give her animation and confidence as well as pleasure. Georgie had her eyes on every one. But neither Paul nor Vera knew of the impending sword.

"Breakfast for the shooters will be at 8.30," said Vera, midst the flutter of departing ladies a little later in the evening.

"You're coming out, Georgie?" asked Grey.

"Of course," rejoined Carstairs, impatiently, for her. She shrugged her shoulders, but would not meet his eye.

"I have good news for your husband, I think," said Wordsworth to Vera under cover of the general farewells.

"You must make yourself at home as usual," proclaimed Carstairs "generally. "I have some work to do."

"Why! you have been at it all day, old fellow!"

"I can't help that. Good-night—if we don't see you again."

Wordsworth went straight to his favourite high chair when he got to the library.

“Now we can talk,” said he cheerily. He was refreshed once more, in thorough good humour, and now was beginning to remark the glumness of Carstairs; another attack of temper, Paul supposed, in which he could by no possibility be concerned, and for which, as regarded others, Paul fancied that he could successfully prescribe. He had good news for Carstairs—his friend, like himself In Opposition.

Meanwhile, forgetting that had it been as he was led to suspect, the culprit would aim at and would have practised deception, Carstairs was astonished at the conduct of the chief.

Less egoist, Carstairs would have had

an easier task ; but he thought of himself and his prospects. Partly from incredulity, partly from egotism, Carstairs shrank from the strife. Wordsworth's intimacy had been the heart's desire of the office-seeker ; and men can become cold to the claims of honour when interest instructs them not to make an enemy.

As Paul proceeded to give the reason for his arrival, the situation became more and more involved.

The leader had come a few miles out of his way, and had proposed to sleep at Temple instead of going to town, that he might personally convey important news to a personal friend and future colleague. Carstairs saw the fruit of his labours—ripe and golden—just before him.

Wordsworth told him a secret known

only to the leaders on either side, surmised by many, and ignored by the crowd. The decision of the Government was to dissolve at once—instead of waiting till the spring, as had been confidently asserted by everybody. It expected defeat, more or less, but certain external events were believed to offer a more favourable chance than might again occur to prolong the life of those at present in office. Wise or unwise, Her Majesty's Ministers intended to spring a dissolution on the country.

On the other hand, the Opposition would not be taken at a disadvantage. Doubtless—and so far the Government was justified in its own wisdom—the Opposition would have preferred to wait till the next year. But—and here Paul Wordsworth's eyes simply shone with excitement over the

coming struggle—so far as any prophet could vision or calculations touch the probabilities, there was little uncertainty in the issue. Ministers were in a minority in the country. The prospects of the Opposition were brilliant. A majority was almost a thing of course. The party would sweep the country, and Carstairs might rely on the offer of a suitable office—a seat in the Cabinet.

Yes, Carstairs saw all he had schemed for was in full view; Paul Wordsworth, in fullest confidence, sparing these important hours to inform Carstairs of party manœuvres and of personal prospects. Something was the meed of his own abilities and his untiring endeavours; but few get less pleasant recognitions of these than the men just outside the Cabinet—at least

in one party—and this somewhat abnormal stimulus came from the personality of the man with whom he must quarrel.

Must quarrel? Could Carstairs quarrel with this man now? One step more, and Carstairs would be independent of Wordsworth; dare he quarrel with him yet?

Carstairs saw all—all it involved. He scanned again those able intelligent features, and, as with steady gravity but with strong zeal, these prospects were placed before him, Carstairs tried to shut out all the rest. He would behave as the man of the world. He would ignore what had been told him that afternoon.

So at last, when Paul Wordsworth ceased to speak—speaking as such clear-minded men speak, even to a single intellectual listener, in phrases and words which

have as much form as force—when the rolling sentences died away, when it was for Carstairs to reply, when the grateful though dignified acquiescence should have been given—then there was silence. A great log of wood fell prone on to the hearth, jarring and blazing as it lay smoking. Carstairs stooped to pick it up, —but he did not answer his chief.



CHAPTER VIII.

HONOUR OR HONOURS ?

“ We say that each soul knows its own victories as it knows its own bitternesses. This is not altogether true. Influence follows character, as effect the exertion of force, —sometimes at once and visibly, sometimes when the cause is so far removed as to be scarcely traceable.”—*M.S.*

THE silence prolonged itself. Wordsworth relapsed into meditation. He did not take his responsibilities lightly, and he was not inclined to quarrel with one who did,—if that deliberative method of receiving news kept Carstairs silent.

It was with intense surprise that Wordsworth heard the answer which at length was given in a husky voice.

“ You had better not count on me,” said Carstairs, trying to keep his tone

matter of fact. "I think of not presenting myself for re-election."

"My dear fellow! What nonsense! I wish that all seats were as safe as yours, and, if it were otherwise, an arrangement would always be made for *you*. We count on your help. And from what you have said—not once but often, as plainly as a man ever says anything on these occasions,—I fancy, I know, that a portfolio has special attractions for you. What do you mean? What do you want to do?"

"I don't know: yacht: study colonies: stay out of it all for a few years."

"You might as well stay out of it for ever, then," retorted Wordsworth. "*Why?* It can't be *money* with you. Rubbish! you are joking. I beg your pardon, but you see one's sense of humour is not so

acute as it might be after the last two days of skirmishing. You are not serious ? ”

Carstairs' face was immovable now. He put his chin up, and murmured between his teeth :

“ Yes.”

Wordsworth was perplexed and astonished—a little impatient. He was not blind to the fact that the abilities of Carstairs were of a higher order than his character. Carstairs might possibly think himself of great value, and be standing out as the player of his personal game—partly to assert his dignity, partly because he saw some chance of profit to himself.

“ I do not think that you are treating me well,” said Wordsworth, willing to test the theory, but still friendly. “ I can

conceive of your thinking me wanting in ceremony, perhaps. Of course all that sort of thing is formally to be gone through afterwards. If this visit is at all official, I am here only to ascertain your views. But, surely, if I come to you, if I speak out frankly to you as friend to friend, you can reply to me as fully and frankly?"

"I have told you fully and frankly," sneered Carstairs—obviously sneering—"I remain outside the Cabinet; probably not in Parliament."

"I will not press you," answered Wordsworth more stiffly, but still attributing the matter to some temporary ill-temper, and willing to go half-way to meet the recusant on return. "But I do think that personally you owe me some explanation.

I have rather committed myself on your behalf to X——. Speak frankly. What is wrong? or”—after a pause—“if even you and I must deal in this manner after all that has passed between us, what is your price?”

“What is wrong? What is my price?” repeated Carstairs. He suddenly burst into intense anger, and his face was like that of a demon. “Your confession is my price—that’s all.”

Wordsworth passed his hand over his brow and looked at Carstairs with amazement, yet with relief; for Wordsworth thought that any tangible ground for a quarrel did not exist, and the supposition would be easily removed, when progress might be made.

“I am afraid that I do not follow you,

Carstairs. I certainly, to my knowledge, have never done you anything but good. Confession of what? And why? What has any confession of mine or of any other human being got to do with your becoming a Cabinet minister?"

"I do not expect you to criminate yourself," retorted Carstairs. "Only when you leave Temple to-morrow I shall be glad if you will not return. Our lives will not have much to do with each other henceforth; I will take precious good care of that."

"*What* do you say?" exclaimed Wordsworth, utterly astounded.

"I say that you have ruined my career. I sacrifice all that to me is worth living for. You will have your own way. The very trifling inconvenience of having com-

mitted yourself to X—— may be counter-balanced by the fact that the word *inconvenience* is scarcely strong enough to characterize what I have to suffer through your abuse of my hospitality.”

It was a long sentence. Carstairs was now on his feet, swaying with anger, but also with something of the tone, manner, and gesture of the public platform. It might seem scarcely a genuine speech, yet it marked the high-water line of the morality of Carstairs. To a man of his stamp it was a sort of heroism to resolve—even if he afterwards regretted it—that he would give up everything if it were yet possible to save his wife for himself. Wordsworth, I think, was stunned by the mental thunderbolt. He caught at the words, “abuse of hospitality”—here was

something tangible. He, too, became ablaze with passion, but only his eyes changed, his voice was deeper, and his speech slower, clearer, more precise.

“I am only patient now because it is possible that you may have made some awful mistake. Speak out, man; you have said so much that you shall say it all. What have I done, said, or thought against you? Thank your stars, man, you speak to one with a clear conscience and a good temper! You say I have abused your hospitality. How?”

“You need not ask.”

“I do ask. What is more, I say, my patience has its limits, Carstairs——”

“Mine has. Yes, I will tell you—or show you—what will be sufficient, I think, you sc——”

“Stop!” said Wordsworth. “Remember we are not boys, and, if you have made a mistake, you will be sorry to make it irreparable between us! You had better not call me a scoundrel just yet. You have said quite enough as it is.”

Carstairs felt the immense spiritual strength which repulsed his rage. Wordsworth was not cold-blooded—his face, the pulses of the temple and hand showed that—but he was *calm*, perfectly, but dominantly calm. Never before had Carstairs not only met his match but his ruler. As Wordsworth looked down on him, steadily at him, penetratingly through him, Carstairs knew himself to be in the wrong. He lost his nerve and struggled for his breath, but he was not a man of very fine and rapid thought; so he simply realized

that he was worsted in the first encounter. Demoralized, he delivered the next attack at the invitation of Wordsworth.

Wordsworth now took the offensive by saying: "Does that paper contain your charge against me?"

"Your charge against yourself. It is your writing," said Carstairs, almost wishing to be wrong, as he handed the letter picked up by Bennett when it was left in Vera's room in the summer.

Eagerly Wordsworth took the paper, rapidly revolving what it might contain to give offence to the colleague on whom he had counted.

"Do you mean to say that you have only a few words of my writing against me?" began Wordsworth; then he saw his own letter to Caroline Vallery. Carstairs,

watching feverishly, saw a strange look dawn on the face of the reader.

“Did you write that to my wife?” said Carstairs.

The Sphinx countenance well known to the Commons had replaced every other expression after one moment of astonishment. Wordsworth had not seen the note for fifteen years, so he said:

“This is a forgery.”

“I thought so,” said Carstairs eagerly.
“Forgive——”

“Stop—where did you get it?”

“It was picked up, so it was said, last August. Those who fabricated it will——”

“Stop, please,” Wordsworth said again.
“I said it was a forgery. It is not. I did not recognize it for the moment . . . But do you think it was addressed to your wife?”

“To whom, then?”

Again there was a terrible silence. But this time Carstairs waited.

Wordsworth walked to the other side of the library and returned. Then he spoke with his face hard set, and his voice steadied, giving no answer to the question, but proceeding:

“Do you mean to say that it is this—this discovery, let us say—which has a sufficient effect on you to alter your life? Do you know what you give up?”

“What is that to you?” said Carstairs, feeling an advantage in the implication of wrong. But he was not master of the situation.

“Before it is too late,” rejoined Wordsworth, still deliberately, “let me point out to you that, you do not only break with

me, but, also, with all those to whom through me you are pledged; you give up your future, without power of explaining your reasons; unless—unless you mean to carry your abilities to the other camp?"

"Never!" ejaculated Carstairs, not knowing why he listened. "Power, yes; but power in my own party. I am no renegade."

"Then," said Paul, looking at him steadily, "power with us you shall have, so far as I can secure it for you; your abilities will keep the place once made for you; you need never speak to me save officially; you have wealth enough to accept a peerage if that would make things easier. It is nothing strange that political allies should be mortal enemies; many a man cuts his sponsor. No one knows that *this* is in your possession? Not——"

“No, she doesn’t,” said Carstairs suddenly, taking Wordsworth up at his first hesitation.

“But——”

“Then,” broke in Wordsworth, “let our loss of intimacy be put on some other cause.”

“No,” interrupted Carstairs with a sort of roar. “You shall be silent! The man who makes such terms—offers them or takes them—is a scoundrel!”

“And so I think,” answered Wordsworth, relaxing the Sphinx-like countenance and showing himself to be stirred to the very depths. “Forgive me, Carstairs. The only method by which I could restore my own self-respect was by testing the quality of yours.”

“I do not understand you.”

“To use your own words, ‘man to man,

frankly and fully,' aye, and solemnly, I give you my most sacred pledge that this letter has passed through the hands of Lady Carstairs; it was not addressed to her nor to any one whom you have ever known to exist."

"I am bound to believe you, Wordsworth; but why——"

"Why was it in her hands? Because I look upon your wife — and shall most certainly hope to do so always — as my greatest friend. This letter was addressed to a woman who had a great influence over my younger life. In a fit of egotism I placed the series of letters compulsorily restored by that woman in your wife's hands, fifteen-year-old letters I had not looked at. This, which I did not recognize, has apparently been lost, after the true stage

fashion it appears. If any structure of insults to your hospitality has been built upon it, that baseless structure must go with the explanation. The chimera is killed! You are satisfied? If so, I am."

"Why did you make a fool of me just now?"

"Because you were ready to call me a scoundrel previously. What more? I am not going to humiliate myself or you further. It would be an insult to repeat that assurance, that I forgive you for doubting me till I had spoken; after that Doubles or quits?" he interrupted himself. Never, surely, had Wordsworth left two sentences unfinished and ended an appeal with a colloquialism? But it was so then. "Doubles or quits?" he said, and he held out his hand with a sad grave smile

"Quits," answered Carstairs, briefly taking the proffered hand. "Done."

"*Done*, be it, in all senses," answered Paul.

"Have a B.-and-S.?" asked Carstairs.

"I will. I have to go off by the 6.45 train to-morrow morning."

"Will you be back again at night? or when?" said Carstairs, handing him the mixture.

"Before you are asked to join the new Cabinet," retorted Wordsworth, though while he smiled he wiped his brow as after some physical exertion.

When they parted that night Wordsworth thought that he had been bitterly humiliated, but that Carstairs had come out of it very well. Carstairs was not an analyst of his own feelings, but the danger had sobered

him, the reaction bewildered him, and all he knew was that Wordsworth had behaved as excellently in his silences and in his comprehensions when the scene was over as, on the whole, he had done when he bore up against an unintelligible accusation at an unexpected moment. But the matter could not so rest.

If it had so rested I do not think Paul Wordsworth would ever again have entered Temple. Yet another was more concerned than he in the result of that scene.



CHAPTER IX.

TO THE COVERT.

“The poets speak habitually of love as if it were a passion which could be safely indulged, whereas the whole experience of modern existence goes to show that it is of all passions the most perilous except in those rare cases where it can be followed by marriage.”—*Hamerton*.

GEORGIE LEYTON was restless all that night. When in the murky October dawn she heard the rattle of wheels, and from behind her blind saw that Paul Wordsworth was driving off, she experienced some satisfaction mingled with tremor.

Trimly dressed and strongly shod, she was early ready for the early breakfast; nothing but her dainty little hat wanting to the attire of the sportswoman, a “get-up” not only suitable to the occasion, but pre-

eminently becoming to herself. Grey was always late for breakfast, at whatever hour it were. But all the other men except Sir Ralph, with two or three of the ladies, had assembled before she walked in. She had waited to appear till there was no chance of a *tête-à-tête* with Vera.

Georgie looked extremely well that morning, and had an advantage common to lively, well-tinted, dark women in doing so when fairer complexions were pallid and sensitive spirits were at par. The tide of life then flows languidly amongst most of the weaker and a few of the stronger sex. But Georgie was fresh and bright and cheery. No one could have guessed for what stakes she had played, and that she was still in suspense as to the result.

There is a kind of nature which clearly

foresees its course without realizing the consequences of that course; to the one it is keenly alive, and plans and plots with almost absolute prevision; for the others it has little forethought. It sees that it will get its own way, but it does not, *perhaps*—we would fain hope it does not—count the cost to others. Are there not three grades of pain-givers—the careless, the carelessly cruel, and the cruel with power and will to inflict all possible suffering on those who stand in their way? Perhaps Georgie belonged only to the second grade as—still young but yearning for evil if only by evil she might win her reward—she watched Vera with a grimness which was partly cold-blooded and partly passionate.

Beyond Vera's place hung on the wall

a portrait of Ralph's mother, whom her son resembled and who had educated his cousin. That Lady Carstairs had been the best friend, the worst enemy, of the sharp-witted hoyden whom the elder's tongue and training had corrupted into the witty woman of the world whilst yet in her teens! Georgie looked at that handsome figure and stately face, to which her own had some faint resemblance; it seemed strange to see before it the slight, pure loveliness of the present Lady Carstairs.

Vera saw her looking. "Do you want anything, Georgie?"

"No; that picture tells well in the light to-day. Where is Mr. Wordsworth?"

"Gone, I believe. He only came on business."

One of the strangers to our narrative,

a sportswoman also, took up the conversation. "Do you hear all those wonderful Cabinet secrets, Lady Carstairs? How very interesting it must be! Quite like freemasonry, you know, Miss Leyton."

"Not much is told to outsiders! But I always think that wherever there are secrets men are wheedled out of them."

"I will not break a lance with you, Miss Leyton, for here comes your special defender," rejoined some man.

Grey entered, serenely if sleepily, and after him came Carstairs. There were two vacant places; the host's usual place, beside which sat Georgie, and one at the left hand of Vera. Carstairs went to that beside his wife, whilst Grey greeted Georgie.

"Stay where you are, Grey; Miss Leyton

needs a defender against Colonel Leigh, I know," said Carstairs carelessly.

"Husband and wife together!" exclaimed Colonel Leigh in jest.

"I forgot to ask how's your eye, Vera?" called out Charlie mischievously.

"I hurt it yesterday," explained Vera, as every one looked up with the faint sympathy of breakfasters. "It is a little discoloured."

"A little green, I suppose," added the irrepressible.

"Wordsworth sent you all sorts of tender messages, Vera," said Carstairs abruptly, looking to her, speaking at Georgie. "He was sorry that he had to get up to town by nine o'clock."

"I hope that you both weren't up all night," said Vera, at which Georgie pricked

up her ears on the *qui vive* for any hint of the situation.

“I did sit up,” said Carstairs, “till he went at six. He did not. The great Paul’s visits are not matters of pure pleasure, but I think you will hear tomorrow the reason of his abrupt arrival and departure. Anyhow, he left me with enough to do even after he had, as I suppose, slumbered the sleep of the just.”

Vera and Georgie both detected something artificial in the air of *bonhomie* with which Carstairs spoke; but they differed in their reading of the riddle.

“Such dissipations are not too good for covert-shooters,” said Grey. “I am beginning to think the game of politics is not worth the candle. A precious long one

you must have burnt last night, Carstairs, if it lasted till 6 a.m.”

“I am afraid it will interfere with my arrangements to-day. I’ll come with you all this morning, and then I’ll ask you to excuse me. Send our luncheon to the Black Copse gate, Vera. It will be a lovely day. Perhaps the rest of the party would come out with you to meet us, and the ladies who have been out all the morning would then go back if they were tired?”

Carstairs kept on talking to his wife; never said a word to Georgie; never met her eye at breakfast; never came near her when the party had assembled at the front door. The bright sunshine, now finding its way through the mists, fell upon a charming English group on the gravel before the

stately house brilliantly wreathed in Virginian creeper—the waiting men, the dogs subduing their impatience, the rough suits harmonizing with the autumnal tints on the glowing trees.

The weather had been exquisite that season, and the leaves had turned all colours without falling; even now, on the eve of November, the coverts were far too thick.

Carstairs never came near Georgie, though she was the centre of attraction, so far as women can be attractive on these occasions to men intent on other game. Perhaps it was that he had to arrange the party. Carstairs was a martinet in trifles, and every detail must be as he wished it.

Still at other times Georgie knew it had

been subtly different—she had failed, and if she had failed, what next?

On reaching the nearer gate of the Black Copse the procession stopped and again fell into a waiting group. The arrangements were made. All the notice Ralph took of her was to say, as he said to others about Lady Emily Surbiton and Mrs. Leigh, “I suppose Grey takes charge of you?”

She looked at him. It was almost a pitiful look, but no one else saw it, and he went on with his arrangements as if he had not met her eye:

“All of you please to remember that this covert is dangerous. I have never had ladies here before. All guns must keep strictly to their own lines. Mind this, Charlie, or you’ll shoot the beaters or

one of us. There are places in this wood where you cannot possibly see. If you are careless I will not allow you to shoot here at all."

Charlie was intensely mortified at this address before every one. "As if I didn't know!"

"I don't care what you know, I care what you do!" answered Ralph in his most peremptory tone. "The pitch of the ground and the thickness of the wood are most deceptive. We had a bad accident here twenty years ago, Leigh, in my father's time."

"You cannot be too careful on this occasion," answered Leigh. "The ladies must, of course, keep close to the guns they are with."

"The lightest penalty is a peppering, the

heaviest is death," said Carstairs to Mrs. Leigh. "All right, Smith."

Then the little party moved slowly down the wet grassy lane, the sun falling in patches through the high hedge on the right. To the left was the wood, smelling of the autumn: dank and dreary in the shade; the green all flecked with the orange and brown of decay; radiant dew-drops sparkling everywhere, especially on the spider-caught hazel bushes with the last rusty nuts, or on the glossy haws and their curling yellowed leaves. In a knot, with whisper here and there as one and another was left behind at his post, stealthily progressed the little party, up and down the slopes at the edge of the hill, till at length only Charlie, Grey and Georgie were left with Carstairs.

“May I come with you, Ralph?” asked Georgie.

He raised his gun to his shoulder ; a rabbit fell. Shots were heard from other portions of the wood.

“No ; I may not remain. Stay with Meredith. Charlie, come on. I’ll give you a place where you will not add tailless game to the bag.”

Occupied with his own interests, Grey had not heard what passed, nor had noted the useless anger of Georgie and of Charlie at their respective slights. Grey’s beat was along a half-cleared path, and, truth to tell, he only occasionally thought of Georgie. When the metallic-coloured bird made a dash through the thinner trees towards the sun, or even when the little white tail of a rabbit frisked for a moment on

the sward,—it is to be feared that Grey forgot all about the lady with him as he blazed away with keen delight and much success. He merely thought of her as something to be avoided if he turned to fire over her shoulder.

She was left to meditate in peace, if peace is not a most inapplicable word for her state of mind. Intense and burning curiosity filled her being. Perhaps she shrank from picturing her own wishes in detail. Yet had anything been said? What? To whom?

Carstairs never came near them, of course. Slowly they worked through the wood, and at length emerged on a portion of a field to which the lines ran, where all were to meet. But it took over an hour to get there, and all that time Georgie was in a

state of wild mental and bodily fidgets. How she hated Grey—self-gratulant with his gun for company and his game for object! She could have taken his gun from him and knocked him down with it with great pleasure, as, in the open, he rubbed his hands and ejaculated, “Capital; there’s nothing jollier in life than working a wood like this! I suppose we must wait for orders.”

In effect, one after another likewise emerged, and in the cart was hung the spoil. Every one seemed in high spirits, except Colonel Leigh, who, being a bad shot (given to previous swagger and accompanying self-excusing), now having his wife with him, blamed her presence for his misses. The poor little woman appealed to Carstairs.

"Come with us," said Grey, with kindness not as gallantly expressed as it should have been, perhaps; "I really don't much mind having two ladies."

"Settle it as you please," said Carstairs. "By experience I know that outsiders fare ill for interference in matrimonial disputes. No one thanks them."

Georgie would have liked to say seriously what Colonel Leigh, a comparative stranger, said in jest: "A leaf out of your own book, Carstairs, eh?"

"My wife is too good to quarrel with," answered Carstairs in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Listen to that, Herbert," said Mrs. Leigh, approvingly.

By this time they were ready for another start. "Same order," proclaimed Carstairs.

“Except that I will come with you, Mr. Meredith,” added Mrs. Leigh.

Georgie said nothing, but, when once more they were reduced to five, she went forward with Charlie, who did not notice that she was just behind him, and left Mrs. Leigh with Grey.

Carstairs lifted his eyebrows on finding her there, but said nothing. Posting Charlie, he was about to proceed when she boldly asserted, “I must speak to you before you begin to shoot.”

She could stand it no longer. She must know where she was.

He walked on with her, but that was all the help she got. She felt that his heart was steeled towards her, and she could not bear it.

CHAPTER X.

WHAT SHE SAID FOR HERSELF.

Forbear ! No tongue can mend such pleadings.

Browning.

THE first part of Georgie's punishment had begun.

She felt his dislike as only a woman who loves can feel dislike of herself. He had turned against her. She tried to look boldly interrogative. So did he, as if he had no idea what she wanted at that inconvenient moment.

"Have you anything to say?" he asked coldly, as he saw her essaying to speak.

"I gave you that letter yesterday," she faltered.

"Ah ! so you did, but you made a mis-

take. You can tell Grey, if you like"—he paused, and she started; he enjoyed her terror—"tell Grey that there will be a general election at once; every one will know it this afternoon. That was why Wordsworth came. It is important news."

"To you?"

"To you, I think. It may affect the present arrangements for your marriage, and," he added slowly and emphatically "some of your best friends would be glad when you had a proper home of your own."

They exchanged looks. The tremor had passed from her limbs, the pallor from her face, and he saw that she was roused.

"This is the end, then," she said slowly; "I am very glad."

"Yes, it is the end of your mischief-making. Just listen to me, Georgie, and

if you don't remember what I say it will be the worse for you. Bennett's tongue is silenced. Wordsworth took with him to town a letter to my lawyers. For you——”

“I am on a level with Bennett?”

“You made yourself her tool. Wordsworth does not know to whom—I owed you so much—but I had his permission to give this fact: the letter was one addressed to a woman with whom some years ago he was on the verge of marriage. Had it been an appeal to my wife it would have proved your assertion. But he showed it to her in confidence—she lost it—Bennett found it. You, wishing to believe evil, saw evil. That is all.’

“You believe that story?”

“I believe it.”

“It must be your interest to do so.”

“Think what you please! Your opinion does not affect me. Of us for the future you will see very little; to others you will see that you must be silent for your own sake. You dare not make an open enemy of me.”

She did not speak.

“You need not go on my account from Temple. I shall not be there much, nor shall I interfere with you. In public I shall treat you as the cousin whom my mother brought up from a child; and my wife knows nothing of your schemes, nor indeed of anything but my under-rating of her worth.”

“My schemes? Her worth?”

“I came out to shoot, not to argue.”

“How brutal a man can be!” she exclaimed. “But you shall hear my side!

I am thankful it is at an end ! The sacrifice has been on my side, not on yours. What did you risk ? You, who threw me over, when you knew you had made me care for you—threw me over for, till then, a stranger to you ! You, who after your marriage sought me out again ; you, who took advantage of your experience, your manhood, yes, and of my affection for you, to estrange me from others for your sake ; who made me reckless of everything else if I could please you ! And I did please you : I made you feel that you had lost by your marriage to another ! Is it not true ? ”

He was silent.

“ You shall hear me. Self-respect ? It is not your fault I have any left—that I can, before others at least, hold my head high enough still. . . . No, you shall hear the

plain truth as to ourselves ; you, who have taught me to amuse you by speaking plainly of others !”

“Recrimination can do no good now,” he answered sullenly.

“I know that. I do not quite understand you as a devoted husband of that woman.” She laughed bitterly. “I do not understand how I shall behave as the devoted wife of Grey Meredith. Let that pass. Oh, Ralph !” she cried, with a sudden change of tone, “think of it ! These nine years in which I have cared for you, and you know it, and whatever restraint there was in it all coming from my side, not from yours ! And now,” she exclaimed, with eyes brilliant and cheeks aflame, “by the mere renouncing of me you think to ‘live happy ever after.’ You will not do it. I have neither Wordsworth’s

learning nor Vera's religion—your own mother took care of that—but I know that in this world there is something which pays every one back."

She walked on. The reproaches of such women, when angered and anguished, naturally fall into the dramatic manner, the rhythmic measure and the poetic thought. Whatever Georgie had been to others, to him she had been faithful, even in her few self-restraints, and, as Carstairs had bent the previous evening before the force of character in the stern man, so in the noontide he was subdued by the force of emotion in the woman whose life in many ways he and his had tried to spoil.

"Georgie," he said more gently, and stopped—for what was there to say? . . .

Unheeding the flight of time, they had waited and slowly walked near the bottom of the Black Copse, where, from a clearing, a grass path leads over a stone arch from steep bank to bank above the stream—almost a river in force and depth—which runs fifteen feet below. There it runs, among the maroon-coloured leaves and glossy berries of the elder, among trailing branches of bramble, and among the rugged, rusty grass; a clump of thick foliage, holly trees and brambles knit together, where younger wood had tried to intrude, forming a wall at one side of the path for a few yards. The two were effectually screened from sight; their ears were accustomed to the shots; they were both absorbed in the painful scene—the power of which over both of them was scarcely indicated by their words, however

glowing ; . . . careless Charlie was coming up, and no one warned Sir Ralph. The keepers had seen that, for some strange reason, he was not shooting. The beaters had finished with that part of the wood, nor would any one, had they feared the issue, have cared to interfere with Sir Ralph. And so they did not know ; and nearer and nearer came Charlie, shooting whenever he saw a movement in the brake. . . .

“Georgie !” said Sir Ralph, quite gently for him, and he drew nearer to her, “Georgie, we will turn over a new leaf. It was my fault, but——”

Behind the covert of the holly trees came Charlie ; a bird got up ; right and left he shot, fast as gun can be fired. . . .

In the darkness which fell with the sting and a gush of warm blood over his

face, Sir Ralph heard a shriek, a groan, a fall—a splash—at his side.

The keeper, returning too late, said his shout—his scream—followed the shots instantly ; but to Carstairs — trying to clear his eyes that he might see, with the vision of the moment before so impressed upon him that he still thought he *saw*—it seemed hours before he called, an eternity before he was aided.

“Georgie,” he cried then, “Georgie, are *you* hurt too?”

There was no answer. Georgie would never answer. Whilst Charlie rushed up and fell back, horror struck, the keeper’s whistle had summoned two men. They were scrambling down the bank to pick up the dead body, fallen over the arch and floating on the stream.

“Georgie!” repeated Carstairs in agony for her, and groping where she had stood as he thought. They caught him at the edge.

“Get me water, fools, whoever you are,” he exclaimed. “Let me wash away this blood and see what has happened.”

They got him some water: the vision of Georgie as she was about to speak faded into the darkness; he thought that the brown autumnal leaves were flitting about, colours melted into chaos; agony overpowered him; and whilst they brought up the body of Miss Leyton from below, Sir Ralph knew nothing of what passed, till he awoke to a hum of voices—a fierce pain—and still the awful darkness. And through it all he heard that Georgie was killed!

CHAPTER XI.

TWO EMPTY HANDS.

“There’s some redemption in the doom of death,
That cuts us from new sins.”

Freeland.

VERA was just preparing to leave Temple to come with luncheon to the head of the Black Copse when the terrible news arrived. Waiting for the rest of the party, she was standing in the sunshine in front of the house, when she saw Charlie flying across the field, leaping the wire fence, rushing over the lawn and almost falling on her as he stopped, breathless and agitated, before the door.

He could not speak; he pulled at her long coat, and tried to utter his tidings,

but his teeth chattered as if it were cold, though his forehead was beaded and his eyes were wild with horror. This was Charlie — careless, complacent Charlie ; what was wrong ?

“ Charlie ! ” exclaimed Vera, alarmed at what she knew not. Simpson, the butler, came to speak to Vera, and now put in his word. “ Is anything wrong, sir ? ”

Charlie did not answer. Others came out : “ Are you ill, Mr. Carstairs ? ”

“ Come inside, Vera,” he groaned.

Vera took him by the arm, and they went into the drawing-room ; Charlie staggered along. “ Don’t come with us,” he cried again.

For ever Vera would remember how the room looked ; for ever remember a tall vase of yellow sunflowers mixed with

sprays of deep red leaves on a certain little table, behind which was a gold embroidered screen of cream silk, on which then she noticed a great stain, though, or because, the physical sickness of fright was upon her.

“Is it Ralph?” she faltered.

“Georgie,” he groaned. “I said I’d come to you. I did it,” he buried his face in his hands. “They’ll bring her directly.”

“Georgie? Tell me, Charlie; what is it? An accident? Is she hurt—shot?”

“Yes. Killed. I did it,” he said, flinging out the monosyllables as she bent down to hear.

“Georgie? Killed? By you? It can’t be true.”

“Yes, it is. That’s not all, Ralph’s hurt too. They’ve gone for doctors. I think

he's blinded. Oh! don't leave me," he cried in agony, and tried to clutch her deadly cold hand.

"I will come back to you," she said in incredulous, chilly horror, as she left him. A beater had arrived, confirming the news, and giving requests for preparations, but the man knew or would tell no more to Lady Carstairs. Sir Ralph and Miss Leyton had been together, and she had been killed, and he was hurt somehow—his eyes, they did say, but no one knew until the doctors had come.

Vera came back to Charlie after giving a few directions. She was quite quiet—stunned and almost incredulous.

"Take me to Ralph," she said to Charlie. "But first tell me all you know. I must hear."

Begging her "to abuse him like a pick-pocket," to do anything, not to stand and look at him, Charlie recounted all he knew till he came to the part where, horror struck, he rushed forward to find Ralph, his face covered with blood, groping for Georgie who had fallen dead.

Vera fainted and had just recovered consciousness when Simpson came in to say that Sir Ralph was arriving.

They had fortunately met the family doctor on the high road; his servant had taken necessary notes and telegrams; all had been put in train as far as possible; and now Mrs. Leigh, Grey and the doctor came with Sir Ralph to Vera. He walked into the hall—they led him—a bandage concealed his face. A few quick words told what was to be done till

further assistance arrived. And, meanwhile, the doctor went back to superintend the other party.

* * * * *

Who does not know the strange suspension of life and activity after a catastrophe? In such moments we realize our mortality. All the issues of the struggles are suddenly rendered insignificant by the changed venue—the conditions of existence are nothing when existence itself is threatened.

Restoration of the deprived faculty, relief of the suffering, retention of those slipping away from life—these seem to be the end of life.

The house party melted away from Temple, so it seemed. There were sudden partings, hasty departures, unsaid good-

byes—for the host was in danger and the hostess in grief; then there fell a great stillness on the house, the servants moved more noiselessly than ever, the sick room seemed instantly established, and the strain at once began: all seemed as if nothing had ever been otherwise. And yet only that morning Ralph had been in full health—except indeed for various symptoms of overwork—and Georgie was glowing with vigour! It was perfectly impossible to realize that in a moment—painlessly, irremediably—the vivid flash of intelligence had been extinguished. Georgie was dead.

The shock had on Vera a strange effect, of psychological interest. Through those first hours after she knew the worst she was in supreme and acute exaltation of spirit—that state of tension in which the

spiritual aspects of life appear the only facts of existence—a state in which, though moving about more efficiently and acting more decidedly than usual, such natures aspire to look on things which are invisible. Pangs of suffering seem to apply motive power to those souls.

Through no ill feeling towards Georgie was it that Vera did not yet think much of her as a *person* lost from their lives. “The body” was a thing to be cared for—Vera gave orders for that when it was come to Temple—but it took some little time for her to realize that *it* had been of Georgie.

It was to be made ready for the inquest—“purely formal, but necessary.”

Presently Vera went to see that her orders had been carried out. It was in

no malice that, even as she neared the door, she thought that poor Georgie, like Pope's Narcissa, would have exclaimed: "One would not sure look hideous when one's dead."

The little spark in her own mind—the only reaction against the strain—of course pained her by its flippancy, but when she reached the door she was unable to enter. The old servant from within, Esther, came out and found her standing there, white and shivering.

Vera was too intensely conscious of spiritual life to have that physical fear of the newly dead which overcomes many a woman, even more intellectual and experienced. But she was overpowered by a sudden rush of feeling towards what had been living, and the distress about her

husband, which was very keen and real, was for a moment suspended to give free play to this emotion.

So when Esther would have stopped her, deferentially, Lady Carstairs answered: "I could not leave Sir Ralph before, but I must go in now."

"Shall I come in with you, my lady?"

Vera shook her head, passed into the room, and shut the door upon herself and the dead.

Six hours since this had happened to Georgie. Was it Georgie?

The face was covered—the shot had disfigured the face in piercing to the brain, for she had received the full charge from Charlie's second barrel. The face was covered, but the two hands were "folded on the breast;" there was nothing but

whiteness to be seen, and just those two still hands on the dull sheets.

Vera was standing looking at it, solemnly, and wonderingly too, when there was a soft tap at the door, and Esther came back—some tiny thing in her hands.

Esther was an old servant indeed, a woman of some sixty years of age, a “bit of a character” as she liked to call herself; a woman with a hard exterior, action and speech, and an inwardly kind thought. She was, with all her brusqueness, one of those motherly-dispositioned unmarried women whom other women often choose for comforters, but she spoke with the downright-ness of her class, which knows no glosses in such cases, nor accounts one time better than another for the telling of a painful truth. No gossip was Esther in any serious

matter, but "what her ladyship had to hear her ladyship must hear, and, for what, why not then as well as any time besides?"

In her old-fashioned cap and apron—the second housemaid, not Esther, was for show—Esther came near and woke her lady from a solemn reverie.

In her black frock at the foot of the white couch Vera was standing, her hands half over her face.

"It will be streekit as you wull it, my lady," said Esther, as Vera moved from her attitude of prayerful thought. "I went by the doctor's orders. Puir bit thing! there's na doot ho' she'll have died; 'tis a pity, seein' as she comes o' gentry, that she canna bide without their fash. But that's neither here nor there,

my lady," as Vera, disturbed, moved dreamily towards the door. "I doubt I wull have to ask your leddyship, afore she stiffens, if her rings should have come off. I brought them to your leddyship."

"Oh! Esther, take them away. I can't think of these things now. I must go back to Sir Ralph. Keep them safely for —us."

"But there's only yerself to ask, my lady. Miss Georgie's been at home here all her life. I've kenned a wheen mair than she'll have kenned a kenned—puir leddy! Byegones is byegones, my lady, and am I no' t' putten back Sir Ralph's ring on her finger?"

Vera was bewildered.

"I don't know what you mean, Esther."

"Truth, I had no call to trouble you,

but, barring your rights, my lady, we should put back that ring on her finger, or maybe, with her killed that gait and a', she'll no rest—Gude save us.”

It was strange, that lingering superstition, but Vera did not remark it then.

“Dinna fash yourself, my lady,” said the old woman with the best of intentions. “It’s all over now. But, ye ken, Miss Georgie had a mind to be Lady Carstairs herself.”

It was the old story, but never so distinctly told to Vera as now, in the presence of those two dead hands on the white stillness.

“You must not say such things, Esther. Miss Georgie was like the daughter of the house—and she lies there.”

“Then your ladyship will let me pit back her ring. If I had minded it at the time——”

“What ring, Esther?”

“*This*, my lady. Miss Georgie got it from ” (*i.e.*, had it given her by) “the master just before his mother’s death. It was when he was making the most fuss of her, ye ken. I have just been like one of the family, and Miss Georgie said this to me one day after Lady Carstairs died: ‘It won’t be so long, Esther, before I’m back again.’ Those were the very words, my lady, and we took it that it was all settled, and then we heard in a few months that Sir Ralph was a-marrying a Miss Ludlow. Bennett and me never were friends at the best of times, but we were together then, and she told me how hard

Miss Georgie took it. You was no way to blame, my lady, but——”

“Esther,” interrupted Vera, “I should not have listened so long. And yet I am glad to know. But do not speak of it.”

Esther was offended.

“It was but right you should ken how it was, my lady, for Miss Georgie’s sake ; but I’m no talker, my lady.”

“I am sure you are not, Esther ; but leave me for a few minutes alone. Give me that ring. Yes, yes, I understand.”

Again Vera was left alone with the dead.

There was the ruby ring ; inside was graven the intertwined initials of her husband and Georgie, with a date of a day a few months before her own marriage.

No one thought of Grey's engagement ring. Esther had only brought back this.

When Esther returned to the room, after Vera had left, that symbol was on one of the white hands.

"Take it, Georgie," Vera had exclaimed; "take it! keep it in your death as you kept it in your life. O God! I knew what misery he has inflicted on me. I did not know that she had a right to expect that I should be miserable. But you would forgive me, Georgie—you know I did not know."

Vera had then forgotten so much in Georgie's character. Vera only realized that she had taken Georgie's place, and indeed the girl had been cruelly treated by Ralph Carstairs.

Vera had sunk down by the bed with a

moan of anguish ; the reaction had begun, she could not turn away from those two white hands protruded from the folds. To her dying day Vera would never forget them—all by themselves.

“There, Georgie,” she said aloud, without raising her head; “there’s your ring! But you need not have tried to make me more miserable than I was in my marriage.”

The door was softly opening as she slipped the ring on to the still flexible finger ; thus speaking, bending over her strange task of sentiment, almost feeling with Esther that she was appeasing the dead, Vera did not hear the hesitating step of Paul Wordsworth. He saw at once that she was almost hysterical, and spoke in a quiet, firm tone.

“They said you were here. It is not good for you to stay longer. Come! you are wanted.”

She looked up at him as if she scarcely comprehended—with wild eyes and brilliant cheeks.



CHAPTER XII.

PHILOSOPHER OR PHYSICIAN?

“How each has a story in a dispute, and a right one, too, and both are right or wrong as you will.”—*Thackeray*.

SEEING her state without quite understanding it, taking her hand reverentially to make her come away, when out in the corridor Paul Wordsworth began to speak to her, as to a child, in short sentences and in steadied tones.

“I have come to be with you till to-morrow. I came back as soon as I could when Grey’s telegram arrived. I have seen Carstairs.”

“I thought he was resting. They said I was to go. I did not leave him till then.”

“I know. You have had some terrible hours. I saw the doctor first.”

“I must go back. I can’t leave him in that state.”

Just after she spoke another meaning was apparent to her, and she continued, to him irrelevantly, but he saw she was not herself. “No, I can’t; I can’t. Please go, Mr. Wordsworth. You shouldn’t come to us when you are so busy. Oh! I must go to him.”

She panted for breath with two or three little tearless sobs, and sank down on a couch at the end of the corridor “Please leave me to myself,” she reiterated.

Seeing she was in earnest he walked a little further down, not looking at her, but he heard her rise suddenly and then fall back again, crying.

He returned, and almost lost his self-command. He could not bear to see her thus; but he did not betray himself. Only the tone, the touch, the eyes, were almost a revelation of what he felt—which then she never thought of. She was only struggling for self-command—not thinking of Paul—except that his presence was not instinctively oppressive to her—it was every circumstance of her life which pressed on her heart and memory.

“I am better—quite well. There! I am going.”

Just then the doctor passed, saw, and questioned on, the state of strain.

“You have a long time before you, Lady Carstairs. Sir Ralph is going on favourably, I trust, but it is a serious accident in his present state of health.

You have eaten nothing since your early breakfast. Sir Ralph does not want you now. I am going to ring for your maid and give her some orders about you."

When this was arranged, the doctor returned and continued a conversation interrupted on the first arrival of Wordsworth. Dr. Smith had been at college with Wordsworth, they had lately renewed their friendship, and as far as the present situation of affairs was concerned they spoke with perfect frankness and mutual confidence.

"I was going to give you my opinion," said Dr. Smith, following Paul into the Carved Parlour. "It is of course subject to modifications. I have no doubt that he will be blind. The shot passed behind both eyes in a peculiar manner—I only re-

member one similar case—and the sight is absolutely destroyed. But ——”

“That is bad enough; surely there is nothing more?”

“I fear so. He has been in a bad state of health for some time.”

“I never heard of it. He always seemed to me particularly strong—and, you may have heard, we are on the eve of a fight.”

“He probably would have broken down. But the point is how to keep him quiet to-night. By the way, he does not know that he is blind; nor does Lady Carstairs know his state—yet. They have had shocks enough for one day.”

“I came here to see if I could be of use, but I fear that my presence is connected with exciting subjects, and, if I am of no use, I *must* go from here to-night.”

“If you can stay, do so,” said the doctor, pursing up his lips, and standing with his shaggy, long brown and grey beard askew on his chest. He seemed half the height of Paul, but as he looked up he appeared to be measuring the statesman physically and morally. After a pause the doctor’s beard was straightened, and his eyes met Paul’s with grave trust.

“There is no lack of surgical skill in the case of people like the Carstairs; but it sometimes happens that such are far more isolated in their sorrows than the unknown and even the penniless. The news will be telegraphed through the world; but who is there who can control Sir Ralph or console Lady Carstairs? It isn’t help, it is personal sympathy that she wants. She is very young, and not strong; she has no

relations, nor has he, and the person we want does not exist for them. Mr. Meredith is useless and too young; Mr. Carstairs is raving on his own account. As for those flighty women who left here to-day they are idiots. By the way, it would not be bad to have Miss Bentley here. I know Lady Carstairs can stand her when she is ill."

"Yes," said Wordsworth, "I will see if that cannot be arranged. What else can we do for them?"

Whilst the doctor was talking he had made up his mind. They were partly talking till Vera should come back, partly for the sake of serving their friends.

"You, and only you, can help us to-night," said the doctor suddenly.

"If I can, I will stay."

“Yes, you will do—if you understand. But not a word to Lady Carstairs.”

“I will obey all your orders—anything to help them. But you speak and have spoken as if it were more serious than I anticipated.”

“It may be. Sir Ralph must and should keep quiet to-night, but he will not and cannot. I want you to be with him *if* I can in no way get him to sleep. When he questions you, if he questions you, speak of his accident as if you apprehended only a temporary loss of sight, engage his attention in any possible way ——”

“But, pardon me, is not exciting his brain to be avoided?”

“If we can get him rest we will, if not we must distract him from his present current of thought; to-day, political in-

terest seems insignificant, and at this moment if he knew he were blind I doubt if he would care."

The eyes of the two men met. "Under other circumstances," continued the doctor, "I should feel it a breach of confidence, but I do not speak from any confidence, but from observation, to tell you this. I have known the whole family from my boyhood. Lady Carstairs I have only seen since her marriage; she is a charming woman; but I have had good reason to believe that Sir Ralph's affections were previously engaged. To-night he is agonized, not only with pain, but with remorse."

"But," said Wordsworth, "forgive me. This is not my business, and, though after *you* have thought it right to speak on the subject it is difficult to say it——"

“I am aware of that. But, if in speaking to you, in trusting you; whom I have known to be trustworthy for five and twenty years now, Wordsworth; if in making you the confidant of my surmises, I can prepare help for what may occur, I am doing no wrong. No one else can do the work you may have to do to-night.”

“I?”

“Yes. I anticipate no action at all from any soporific we dare to give to Carstairs. No doctor nor parson could control him. There is some chance in the influence of one whom he respects; in your presence he will exercise some self-restraint. And, if Lady Carstairs is there—from what he has said just now—I feel sure irreparable mischief would be done to both of them. To avoid blundering it is essential that you

should comprehend the situation. *He cannot bear her to be with him now.* I think I hear her coming. Will you put yourself under my orders, follow my hints, and let us get over to-night? To-morrow — comes down. But both surgery and medicine in this case need moral help. Will you help?"

"I will obey you implicitly."

"I shall return to my husband now," said Vera entering. "I have taken off my heavy dress and followed all your directions."

"My dear lady, you have not yet obeyed my orders. I am going back to Sir Ralph, and Mr. Wordsworth is going to take you downstairs to see poor Mr. Carstairs and get something to eat. And then I want to speak to you before you go into the sick

room. Trust me, Lady Carstairs. I know what I am doing, and we are acting for the best."

* * * * *

The doctor was right. There were grave moral and dangerous medical aspects of the surgical case. Apparently he was wrong about Vera's presence. Sir Ralph had exclaimed in the afternoon with relief when he knew that she had left the room, but he imperiously demanded that she should return before the doctor had had opportunity of explaining to her, as he intended to put it, conventionally, that in certain cases of excitement the presence of the most dearly loved may be hurtful to the, in that, eccentric patient. So the sick-room was not forbidden to her, though for her sake, whose case was not that of the

beloved and loving wife, this would have been no bad thing.

As the evening wore on it was evident that, apparently nerveless man as he had been, Sir Ralph was suffering from an acute nervous attack. Denied by nature—if not by manhood—the relief of tears; denied by surgical accident the relief of solitude or of exercise; denied any consolation from without by the circumstances of the case, Sir Ralph was in agony of mind such as, perhaps, he had never experienced in all his previous life. He had been stunned and sullen during the day, now he awoke to full feeling and to making others feel his mood. Perhaps it irritated him all the more that he had prided himself on his Stoic indifference to pain (such men are indifferent to pain—when others suffer, at

least), and now his only resource was to attribute his suffering to that pain, or rather to let it be so attributed by those who chose. Needless to say he did not even make that apology to himself.

You know what is the mood of a spoilt suffering child? Add to the petulance of the child the passionate, overbearing egotism of the man, the power of the fully-developed nature vented in evil-tongued words and ceaseless contradictory commands—you know then what was Carstairs that night.

By midnight he consented to take a soporific under the doctor's orders, but before that time he steadily refused it. It has been said that we owe much of our self-respect to our sight. Whether he could have controlled himself had he per-

ceived Paul, I do not know; he did not, though he knew that Paul was there.

It was bitter humiliation to Vera that Paul should stay, and should see and hear how Carstairs treated her—rather worse than his valet, which at that time was saying a good deal. But once Vera said to Paul in an undertone, “Do go to rest now. It is very good of you to try to share our suffering——”

“But,” interrupted Carstairs, “I’ll thank you not to meddle. Who’d miss *you*, if you went?”

He had previously refused to let her go.

“Come, come,” said the doctor returning, “Sir Ralph is brusque, but you must excuse that when he is in pain, Lady Carstairs.

Suppose you take his advice and go for the present to rest yourself. I'll call you if anything is required."

Vera caught Paul's glance at her husband, but when Paul looked at her there was simply a sign that she should follow the doctor's suggestion.

"I want the room quiet, and then I'll see if I can't make you more comfortable, Sir Ralph," answered the doctor to another growl.

"Wordsworth, you stay a bit with me, as soon as all these idiots have gone. Quiet? Hear, hear!" the sufferer exclaimed.

So, whilst the doctor completed his orders for the night, having seen Vera after she left the room, Wordsworth was left alone with Carstairs.

Carstairs seemed to regain his courtesy a

little, and began to eagerly question Wordsworth on the coming election, and the composition of the Cabinet in case of success. The eagerness did not last, and his attention seemed to wander.

“I am afraid that you are suffering terribly, Carstairs,” Wordsworth ventured to say, for, though shocked at the revelation of character, he most deeply pitied Carstairs in his present plight.

“I am suffering, Heaven knows,” broke from the lips of Carstairs. Then he tried to take a drier tone. “It is a bore for you and us, this happening. My seat is safe, I should think; one never knows. We shan’t lose that, but I shan’t be able to assist other people. How long do you suppose it’ll be before my eyes get right?”

“Don’t worry yourself to-night about that,” answered Paul evasively. “Keep quiet—it will be all the better for you.”

“Keep quiet! Where’s Charlie?” he said abruptly.

“I don’t know. Poor boy, he is terribly upset. Do you want to see him?” asked Paul, and then he recollected that Carstairs would never see any one again.

“I see him? I’d *kill* him if he came my way to-night.”

He used other words of vituperation, and then the doctor returned. For a time there was comparative quiet, and, as has been said, Carstairs then welcomed the suggestion of artificial sleep.

Meanwhile Vera went to Charlie, and after staying with him for an hour, returned softly to the dressing-room of the sick-chamber,

where she was met by the doctor, and told to go to rest, as Sir Ralph seemed quieter.

So he was for a time.

But he did not sleep at all. It seemed a long unending night. Quite silently, about two o'clock in the morning, Vera slipped into the room as arranged, and Paul Wordsworth quietly went out. The doctor had said that for her own satisfaction she could come, but told her if possible not to make her presence known. So at first Carstairs did not know that his wife was there.

He moaned and groaned, and tossed from side to side, and muttered to himself. About four o'clock he started up in bed, looking ghastly with his bandaged head in the half light.

“Who’s there?” he said with a fearful shudder.

The doctor rose from his chair, and with one hand motioned to Vera to be silent. “Asleep,” he formulated with his lips.

And so they watched him struggling with the vision—whatever it was—which floated before his brain. The struggle did not last two minutes by the clock, and it ended in a hoarse sound, “Georgie, Georgie!” He fell back exhausted and trembling, and suddenly awoke.

“Who’s there?” he said again in different tones. He was conscious now. The doctor signed to the wife, and she came quietly and laid her hand on his, following the doctor’s signs.

“I—Vera!” she faltered.

He lay still for a moment or two

holding her hand, and then he flung it from him: "I remember it all now. Go away, Vera. Is the doctor here?"

"Yes."

"Where have they put Miss Leyton's body?" asked Carstairs quietly, for the first time mentioning her.

"In the old school-room," answered Vera.

"I will go there now. I must. It is my only hope. All this night, and just now, I have seen her—I must see her dead. Have I not a little sight? Just once."

"I cannot let you lift the bandages, Sir Ralph. Wait till daylight comes and then ——"

"If my eyes are bandaged, why wait for the daylight? With help or without I will go."

“ Will it harm him ? ” said Vera.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

“ What does it matter to you if it did, or to me either ? ”

“ Wait a moment, Ralph.”

She drew the doctor into the dressing-room.

“ Would it hurt him—his sight ? ”

The doctor looked at her. “ My dear lady,” he whispered, “ nothing can save his sight, and for the rest we must leave him to nature.”

“ I will take you there, Ralph,” she said on her return, trying to take in what the doctor had said.

She was again in a state of spiritual exaltation, and the events seemed to pass as in a dream.

“ Not you,” said Carstairs, but as he

felt her by his side he accepted her aid.

The three traversed the passage till they came to the door. The familiar places looked weird and ghostly as the lamps burnt low, but weirdest and strangest of all was it to Vera to be leading *him* through the dusk as the words rang in her ears—"Nothing can save his sight."

When considerate people speak contrary to their considered resolve it often seems as if they had done so under special guidance, for it made all the difference to Vera's conduct when she knew that he would be always blind. If she had meant to leave him when he was well, she never would—never could—do so now!

"Leave us together," she said to the doctor as they unlocked the door.

There was an entrance from the bedroom, and in that room Esther had determined to watch that night with her Bible and a bunch of half-withered rowan berries preserved for some occult reason of her own from the August splendours. But Esther did not reveal herself—she was asleep, after all, in the arm-chair when they came in, and as she awoke she was afraid to discover herself.

So Sir Ralph and Lady Carstairs thought themselves alone as the doctor withdrew, observing that he would be within call in the passage. Very likely he guessed something of the complex emotion of the scene.

“She is there,” said Vera in a strangely steady voice. “You know the old school-room and how it looks. She is on the

couch ; it is put where the table usually is ; all white ; there are a few flowers there, and only her hands are seen ; the room is nearly dark, there are two candles."

She thought he must want to know.

"Where is the door?" he asked.

"Here, behind us."

He began to grope his way to the couch, but would have stumbled over it had not Vera caught his hand.

"I understand. Ralph, let me help you!" she pleaded.

She caught his hand.

"Where is she?" he said passively.

"Here."

"Put my hand on hers."

It was done. The strong man shuddered as he touched the two white hands with

his burning palm. He gently—very gently—felt them, and he came to the ring.

“What’s this?”

“The ring you gave her,” Vera whispered. “I put it there.”

There was silence.

“Did you do it to mock me—to mock her?” he said angrily, but in a low tone, and Vera could not answer, No; she had never thought of this suggestion, and if she had thought of her husband’s knowing it at all it was with some faint belief that even he must recognize her magnanimity.

“What did you do it for?” he said. “Speak.”

They both took for granted that the symbol was known.

“I did it to show I forgave her for

all the unhappiness she caused me," Vera answered at last on this pressure.

"You forgave her? She caused you unhappiness? Did you cause *her* none?"

"Ralph, I was—I am—your wife."

"I know that," he said in his old sneering tone. "So did she. Why did you come between us?"

"Oh, Ralph!" cried Vera, "did I know anything about her when I married you?"

"And what do you know now? That I know how I behaved to her? That she, not you, was the woman I loved. You fool! that is all you can know. And there is *nothing* more to know. For her sake, not for yours, I tell you that. Yes, you are my wife."

"Hush! oh, do not speak like this in the presence of the dead," said Vera, to whom

the words were terrible ; those words which also for the moment seemed to desecrate the dead, whom she could see—not he !

“ Ralph, you came here to see her. Will you listen to me ? Do not make it harder for us now. You will need me or I could not stay with you.”

“ Need you ? Never. Don’t touch me ! ”

Vera knelt beside the bed, just out of reach of his hand. He stood and thought ; she knelt and prayed.

“ God help us ! he is blind ! ” she repeated over and over again. There was nothing new to her in sorrow or in scorn, and as she thought of him, more as a suffering man than as her abusive husband, it was easier—a little easier, perhaps—for her to forget herself. “ God help us—he is blind.”

CHAPTER XIII.

CHARLIE.

“He went like one that hath been stunned,
And is of sense forlorn,
A sadder and a wiser man
He rose the morrow morn.”—*Coleridge.*

THE day of Georgie's funeral was one of gloom within and without. The jury three days before had respectfully and hastily enough viewed the body, and had returned a verdict of death by misadventure. On the suggestion being made that Anice Bentley should come, Vera had said “it was a pity to bring any one else into such a house,” but had not resisted Charlie's offer to write and ask Anice if she would come. Anice came, and apparently it was more for Charlie's benefit than for that of

Vera, whose time and thoughts were so occupied by the turn of her husband's illness—for illness it had become—that she knew nothing of Charlie's experiences. He seemed, indeed, sullen and stupid, lying in the library with a novel which he did not read, breaking out into sudden fits of anger at trifles, yet not resisting when Ralph sent to say that his brother was not to leave Temple.

Anice found him thus. He was her own age, but she had always looked upon him as much younger. Both of them, however, under especially youthful manners had concealed a good deal of thought supposed to belong to a more advanced period of life. Charlie took this trouble very hardly, and indeed it was no light one—out of carelessness and wilfulness to blind a brother

and to kill his cousin. It was, as he phrased it, "awful bad luck," but shooting accidents often arrive at the exceptionally painful. He had, except to Vera on the fatal evening, said no word of contrition or apology: what was there to say? He had given his evidence in the same sullen way. He did not seem to care at all what was thought. He never asked after Ralph, but listened eagerly to what was said about his brother.

On the first afternoon that the blinds had been drawn up, Anice came into the library by the further door. Behind one of the screens of books, Charlie was lying on a couch. She had entered very softly, and she heard him sob. She did not know what to do, but with a groan he moved, and after a moment or two she went to

him. Tears were on his dark eyelashes, but he spoke gruffly at first.

“What are you doing?”

“Going out. Come with me,” she answered. “We shall just have time before tea.”

“Time before *tea*. I daresay! The routine is awful. Everything goes on just the same, and a lot of servants gossiping and gaping everywhere. I’ll tell you what it is, Anice, I’ll go off to the backwoods as soon as I’m free—I don’t care where. My life’s done for.”

She moved to the window, and he followed. She didn’t know what to say.

“Raining again,” he said. “It always rains now.”

“Not always. There’s a rainbow.”

“I daresay. ‘There was an awful rain-

bow once in heaven!’ We had to get up Keats for that exam.: I failed in that, in everything, except in hurting people. Oh! I know all about it. Don’t bother, Nancy! I’m a brute—that’s all! I’m like this day—the worst thing out.”

“Even that is getting brighter,” said Anice. “I wish I knew what to say to you, Charlie. I feel such a lot of things I can’t say. It must be terrible for you.”

“It is *that*,” said Charlie. “Are you going out if it is fine? Wait a moment.”

He came back with cap and an umbrella. “This is bigger than yours,” he declared, opening the window.

“Oh! how lovely!” Anice exclaimed.

The air was mild, the ground steaming with the heavy rain, which still dropped once in a while. The two were on the

terrace. Opposite the rainbow, in the west on the slaty background of the sky, there appeared a marvellous trembling glow, which grew more and more golden behind the trees to which they turned; these blacker and blacker each moment. Going towards the shrubbery and passing on the tree-shaded path, a dull heavy sound, continuous, alternated with the tiny sharp drip-drop nearer at hand. But they hastened on to get a better view of that fair beauty; at least Anice did, and Charlie followed her. The little iron gate creaked sharply, and the drops rattled fast on the umbrella. They came to the opening on the lake and stood by its edge. It was autumn, and the leaves had but a semblance of life, though on the lake there was, owing to the autumnal mildness, a new

growth of vegetation ; in this corner the water was covered by an emerald green weed—dully bright—and round it the dank coarse grass and withered reeds. But the sky seemed to be trembling and vibrating in its glory. A great curtain of slate had rolled up, and its hue was of mat-gold, a rich, dead hue—gold, but not that gold sparkling as it mingled with the silver over the soft pale, pale green just above the misty uplands. It was a rare effect of loveliness. And the light moved and played in one great mass—there was no sun, but all had become sunset-sunlight—a soft bloom over everything, yet a bloom with metallic brilliancy of colour!

The full round clouds turned brown and orange, then a brilliant tawny red ; the glow crept up the sky ; yet at their feet

Anice always heard the little drops falling one by one into the dully bright lake of emerald green.

Perhaps this effect lasted ten minutes. But before that they began to move and to speak.

“What are you thinking of, Anice?” he said, struck by the girl’s face, transfigured as the light fell on her countenance, with its sweet seriousness.

“I was thinking of you,” she answered directly. “I don’t think that you have a right to go away.”

“Why not? I have not a right to stay here, if you mean that. I don’t know which will be harder—to be blamed or to be pitied. Besides, I can’t stay and know that Ralph is pitching into Vera double for what she can’t help.”

"But that's it. I don't see how you are to leave Vera alone to bear it. Do you know how bad it is? I think they are afraid of telling you, but Vera thought you ought to know."

"He's not dying too?" exclaimed Charlie in horror.

"No, no, no! not now. But his sight will never come back."

"They never told me; why didn't they? Does Vera know?" he said thickly.

"Yes, on the first day she knew. It is terrible for both of them."

"Does he know?"

"Vera thinks he suspects it. I only heard yesterday."

"Then what do you think I ought to do? You thought of something?"

"I don't know, Charlie. But it seems to

me that you oughtn't to leave Vera to do everything herself. It isn't as if—well, you know he has always been a little rough; she never says anything, but one can see. For you, his only brother, to go wandering off—giving her extra worry about you, too, for she is so fond of you, you know—for you to go away selfishly! It would be selfish! Of course it is not my business,” said the girl.

“She has friends. Why, there's Grey and Wordsworth, besides the rest.”

“You are a boy!” she said with girlish scorn. “Those aren't her brothers. It is your place, in any case, to do what you can. Make yourself of some use in the world. There will be heaps of things that Sir Ralph will want by-and-by.”

“As if he'd let me do them!”

"If he is helpless he must let things be done by some one, and he'd learn to trust you, perhaps," she said doubtfully.

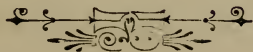
"Nobody ever trusts me," said Charlie involuntarily; "but I haven't been worth it."

"You will be worth it," she answered with full sympathy.

"I don't mind trying if you'll believe in me!" he said suddenly, with a great sigh of relief. "I say! the rain is coming on again, in a waterspout or two. You'd better cut in as hard as you can!" he exclaimed.

Thus the more or less tragic conversation ended in a run similar to those enjoyed when Charlie and Anice's brother, and Anice herself, ten years before had spent a convalescent holiday together.

Charlie had come for a few days, and remained with his fellow-patients in town and country for a few weeks. They had always been good comrades. From that day at Temple, whose morning had seen the funeral of Georgie Leyton, Anice Bentley entered into Charlie's life in quite an unwonted fashion, of which she herself had no idea, though on her part from that date even in thought she ceased to patronize him.



CHAPTER XIV.

NOT GOOD ENOUGH.

“There warn’t no meaning in our clasp—
Half this, half that, all shilly-shally.”

Biglow Papers.

WHAT is worse than a gloomy day in the country? Without doubt to many minds—and to all so far as the physical atmosphere is concerned—a foggy day in town. Yet, muffled as are the sounds of traffic, suggestive as are the sights of misery, depressing even unto the personally well-off as is the yellow murkiness, for those born to be gregarious animals there were these three charms in London that doleful day in January: “people,” politics and pressure—not of country attainment.

It was distinctly exciting to some people, that damp, drizzly, doleful day. By the end of January, in the year following the accidents at Temple, it was well known that ministers would resign on the opening of Parliament, in which they would be in a hopeless minority. Needless, therefore, to say that their most probable replacers had then a pretty good notion as to *Who* should go to *What*. Needless also to state that the newspapers knew more of Cabinet doings and undoings and of the Opposition programme, not only than had as yet transpired but, than was known to have occurred by any of those whose names were so freely bandied about.

Every man who was anything or nothing, who had friends or enemies, or both, who possessed brains or any probable sub-

stitute in the way of birth or bluster, who had claims, or none, to party allegiance, was, more or less voluntarily, waiting upon events. The elections had occurred in November. Since then the Opposition had known what was before it; it had been dressing its ranks; causing here and there a disinterested (?) triumphant Incapable to resign a safe seat in order to bring into the House an excluded politician who, of more merit, had suffered defeat where the Government had its supporters; perhaps, in overlooking its party pledges, as usual, to see which of them made to what interest might demand attention last; perhaps trying to foresee how much blame might be put on the side which would go out if the side which came in saw no chances of fulfilling those impossible promises made so

gaily to unpractical people; certainly it was occupied in genuine preparation, official and personal, for the work of the coming year under the new Cabinet.

Grey Meredith, M.P., had known as little of struggle as might fall to man in his short political life, and now he was on the winning side. His was a safe seat: swayed partially by the victories elsewhere, illogically certain to produce more victories; partially by the romance of his broken betrothal, irrelevantly as that got about and was improved upon by masculine constituents and feminine influence; the electors gave him the easiest possible victory.

He looked very well in manly mourning; handsome and melancholy, he put forth very gracefully the most general

commonplaces. Perhaps too easy winning made the prize light, and if he had had greater struggles he would have appreciated the position attained; but Grey's head had been turned and was still turning.

Always extremely susceptible to woman's favour—for it is needless to say that what he told Vera was only true with modifications which at the time he really forgot—always gaining, and giving himself over for the time to, woman friends, the last year's experience had opened his eyes. He thoroughly appreciated what his unexpected wealth had brought him; he began to acknowledge to himself that his real goal in exertions had been personal; the new luxurious life opening before one pre-eminently fitted to be a pet of society

now made him look with uncomprehending, and so far as comprehending, pitying vision on the enthusiasms of Paul Wordsworth. He began to have a feeling of passive rebellion against the work which he had been glad to share, and his share of actual work had been light indeed.

In this mood he waited in Wordsworth's rooms. Their owner entered once more in full energy. Paul Wordsworth loved a fight, and loved work; for its power he was keen for place, and all was going well with the party. Though Paul Wordsworth was really a first-class *littérateur* and a second-class politician, for that very reason he seemed to care for the sicklier offspring of his brain, more interested apparently in his sometimes ineffective local speeches than in his nationally stimulating books.

Perhaps there was always the idea that if he *could* exert the same force in politics as in literature he would do more good. In any case his keen interest in politics and his genuine delight in party triumphs was a remarkable characteristic of the man.

“I do not mind saying that I am tired out,” said Paul, as, after the short greeting, a constraint seemed to fall upon the two men. “However, it is worth it. Every one has been seen now. Z.’s little game is over, and the first move of X. will be the safe old king’s pawn. For the bigger pieces we rarely have had stronger men.”

“I presume you are the rook—straight forward heavy thing it is! I can’t fancy you as prime minister—a piece which moves in any direction you know.”

Grey then thought to himself it was a pity to waste a rejoinder on Paul, especially in an impromptu, unfinished state. Paul smiled slightly, but he had not asked Grey to come, on purpose to talk things over, only to exchange phrases. Both these men were, however, phrase-makers — the neat form natural in the most impulsive of moments.

“You know what I want to say,” began Paul, as he drew his chair to the fire. “Do you or do you not wish to be my secretary?”

“How do you mean?”

Paul, who hated to give private rebukes, though careless about public hits, braced himself, and made quite a little speech to the lounging Grey.

“Your working or your not working

has hitherto been of little moment to me. You have not done badly anything I really wished you to do; that was all I required. You received a good political introduction; you were less tied than any man who ever pretended to be a secretary at all; I never refused you liberty at any time of the year or indeed any time of the day. Whatever pressure fell on us, you did not share it, and no one knew that you did not. In fact, so far, it has been an arrangement of mutual convenience; you certainly have been an ornament to my rooms at times, and perhaps occasionally my rooms have been of some use to you."

"You are very severe, O chief!" answered Grey, assuming lightness, though he was stung by the light lash. "But I think I did what you wished up to a few

weeks ago. I acknowledge that I have not been fit for much lately. One cannot but be affected by such shocks as—I experienced.”

“It is not your sorrows, but your consolations, which I object to,” said Paul, whose patience had been sorely tried of late by Grey’s making capital of a trouble which in reality he had felt so little that he could talk it over with the first comer. Paul knew, accidentally, that Grey was not pining in loneliness, but enjoying himself and his romance about his blighted hopes in various feminine companies—when he “*could* do no work.”

“I don’t understand you,” answered Grey.

“Well, we won’t quarrel about that,” said Paul, with a softening of the voice for

a moment. Paul was really fond of Grey, even though he now had learnt his limitations. "Apart from our relationship, Grey, apart from all other considerations, bluntly put, the question is this: Besides other officials, *I* want, so to speak, a reliable *servant*; do *you* want a *master*? Whoever shares my life in office must be perfectly reliable and absolutely unselfish; the other qualifications you have so nearly that you would do for me. I would rather have you, Grey, to help with *social* matters than any man I know. I would not put another in your place without asking you if you would help me in all I have for you to do. Will you be my right hand, Grey? If not," he continued, as Grey did not answer, "if not, break off now; let us simply be relations

and friends, I will never say one word of my disappointed hopes for you; you know what I offer you."

Grey was silent. He muttered at last, "I don't know what to say. Of course I expected to be with you, but——"

Paul looked steadily at the handsome but weak face—weak as compared with his own. "You would like to be released; you are not of statesman's stuff. Say it out! I don't blame you. God knows, the life is heart-breaking if you've got a heart to break! I don't know how any one endures it who can be free. . . . Work with me; so far as one man can promise another opportunity to show what he is made of, you shall have it; the rest is only to be gained by yourself. We toil after an ideal, in our better moments; if

you can't see that clearly enough, or can't make the deception strong enough, give it up!" He was walking up and down the room now.

"You see, what you want *is* so ideal, all one's devotion, which is a tax, *and* so very practical; all one's time, even dinner time very often! so that— Well! I'm not fit for even your ornamental secretaryship as you put it! I'd better give it up, for you'd never forgive me if I failed you at a pinch."

"No," answered Wordsworth simply, but gravely, "I never should." Then he said no more, but stood looking into the fire.

Grey got up from the lounge. "Don't think I'm ungrateful, you know, chief."

"I never thought about that at all," he answered in the same quiet way.

"But I did," answered Grey, laying his hand affectionately on Wordsworth's arm. "You've been awfully good to me, old fellow, these two years, and I am a brute to throw you over. But it is really in your own interest."

"Oh! I know that," rejoined Paul.

"Chief," said Grey, with one of his most winning smiles, "you are rather awful when you are eloquent, but when you answer shortly like that — words fail me!"

"I *am* vexed," said Paul. "However, it always was a mistake for a master to care for the interests of his 'prentice: I know exactly what you'll become! . . . But I am not keeping my word."

He walked away. Grey went after him. "I wouldn't have begun it for the world.

But I *don't* care for the fag of the life; so it is best to give it up. Of course I'll do my duty by my constituents, and if you'll let me I'll help you in anything of which my weakness is capable. There are lots of things which no one can do but me, I'm sure."

In spite of his eight-and-twenty years, Grey had for Paul Wordsworth something of the charm of youthful ingenuousness. I suppose all of us know what it is to care for one whom we know to be an impostor in some fashion, because they are very pleasant, very *taking*. For the intellectual man or woman there is often a strange fascination in some one person of their own sex who happily lives and pleases every one by utter want of the very qualities which, otherwise, the greater mind

demands from every one, and demands above all from itself.

So when Grey pleaded Paul's anger ended. And it was with an unwonted tenderness—there is a tenderness of man to man—that Paul replied:

"You are right again. This life is very lonely after all. It was selfishness which made me wish to unite my fortunes with yours. The dream is over. I am responsible for my own disappointment, but I did not wish to be clear-sighted, Grey."

"Oh! I could go on if I tried; it is only that the whole thing is not good enough."

Paul started with sudden energy. "That phrase is ruining England! Not good enough, that's what all young men say! Where are those who will plod on, without being sure of their reward, as we did? No, it's all

scheming and plotting and ambition for paltry social honours, or a return to invertebrate animalism with an 'It's not good enough,' as an excuse for doing nothing. Don't talk to me! You're a set of drifting do-nothings, you young men who want to be so very sure of your personal gains before you will move an inch! 'It's not good enough.' However, there's an end of it."

"I'm not going to leave you in a bad temper with me," said Grey. "Look here," he continued, as the letters came in with tea—Wordsworth had a great weakness for tea—"I shall begin by doing your letters."

"That will be loss No. 1. I could always trust *you* with my letters. You had a true secretarial instinct in sorting, and if you did open the wrong one, I could be sure you never read a word"

"Here is one I don't know," said Grey.

"It may be private. These are all circulars and so on."

"Open it."

"Why, it's from Temple, written with that blind ruler thing, you know, on the paper, written by Carstairs. I've seen no word. The signature is folded outwards."

Wordsworth took and read the letter.

"How is he?" said Grey, going on with the disposal of—in the receiver's eyes—very superfluous correspondence. Grey's personal trustworthiness and close relationship had allowed Wordsworth to use him frequently as an *alter ego* in this respect.

"It is the first time he has written for himself, and I don't like the letter at all," said Paul meditating. "Let's see, to-morrow's

Sunday ; I could go down and come up by the first train on Monday."

"Why? Is anything wrong?"

"I don't know ; I don't know," he repeated.
"It's a very queer production."

"You haven't been down since the day of the accident."

"No, I said I'd go if I were wanted, I've been very busy, you know," said Wordsworth quickly.

"Well, the last time I was there I thought his brain had been affected by the accident."

"Indeed ! But I cannot say that it would surprise me very much, I am afraid."

"The life he leads poor Lady Carstairs, so Charlie told me, is quite too awful ; and Charlie too ! They would like to take him away from Temple for a time, but he won't go, though it would be a relief to them to

change the scene, and the doctors say that it doesn't suit him. They say he was just on the point of breaking down when he was hurt."

"This letter tells distinctly that the writer is in a very bad mental condition. I shall go and see for myself how matters stand."

"You will be astonished with Charlie."

"Poor boy! I don't wonder."

"But I do. It isn't natural. He must break out. He's been like a saint."

Another interruption.

"A lady, who won't give her name, wishes to see Mr. Wordsworth."

"I never see any one whom I do not know. You know that."

"Yes, sir. But she is a lady, and her business is very particular, sir. I thought

you would see her, sir, perhaps. She is waiting in her own carriage, sir."

The manner of his servant was so respectfully firm, though based on nothing but the appearance of the lady, that Paul, knowing the man, obeyed the suggestion, so far as to waver, evidently.

"Can't I see her for you, chief?" said Grey.

"Ask her to come up, if you think she has not made a mistake," said Paul to his servant.

"What have you done to yourself? No, it isn't a manœuvre to get the fair one to myself. You've inked yourself all over when you snapped that spring bottle—fingers first, then face. That comes of being angry with me."

Paul looked in the glass and burst into

a genuine laugh, hastily retreated to a door at the side of the room, stopping to say :

“Fortune favours you, Grey. You see her. If you want me really, send for me. I can’t be bothered with strange women. I’ll just hear her name before I go.”

This scene had occurred before. Grey was aware that Wordsworth waited within the curtains of the second door till the one from the staircase was thrown open. “Madame la Marquise Scalchi,” was announced. Paul’s fingers withdrew from the *portière* ; Grey heard the door softly shut ; and Paul, he knew, had left him to his fate.

Hitherto, “strange women” had been in some form or other beggars for places or for pelf ; Grey’s diplomatic answers were a standing joke between the kinsmen ; and so convinced was Paul, on hearing this

unknown name, that he was not wanted that he presently went out of the house, leaving a message that "Mr. Meredith was to stay and dine; Mr. Wordsworth would be back shortly."

And so Grey received the unknown lady.



CHAPTER XV.

CAROLINE.

“Marry, sir, they praise me, and make an ass of me.”

Twelfth Night.

SHE was a *lady*. No one a better or quicker judge than Grey Meredith, Esq., M.P., on this point.

She came in, dressed in some cunning combining of various shades of deep brown, on which heavily-worked beaded embroidery glittered, relieved with tiny touches of bright gold; a tall hat, brown, with gold bulrushes, added height to an already tall figure. Unmistakably she was a well-dressed foreigner, and her whole air and carriage that of a well-bred and consciously handsome woman.

Grey was on his feet, and his curiosity was aroused in a moment.

(It was the "Caroline" of the love-letters, and her coming was a piece of impudence, but Grey knew nothing of any Caroline, nor of these love-letters.)

His evident assumption of the part of host seemed to perplex the lady.

"I beg pardon," she said immediately, "but I make no mistake. This is Mr. Vurdswoort's house."

"Better than I expected," thought Grey; it was a rich sympathetic voice, and the idiom and accent of the foreigner pleased him as it does so many English travellers.

"This is Mr. Wordsworth's house, certainly. I am his nephew."

"So, you are his nephew. Mr. Vurdswoort is fortunate, and I, too," she said,

interrupting him, "but is Mr. Vurdsvort not at home? I am *so* sorry."

"I am not quite certain," answered Grey, "they have gone to look for him. But allow me to offer you some tea. It has only just come."

"And Mr. Vurdsvort drinks tea, too! And he fled hearing a lady would see him. It may seem strange that I come, but we are ver' old friends."

Grey could already remark that at times her foreign accent was much stronger than at others.

She took the cup of tea handed to her.

Grey satisfied his conscience with the self-assertion that Paul could come back if he chose: if the lady was content, so was he! She was not very young, but she was evidently a woman whose age it was im-

possible to guess. She took off her glove, and among the heavy rings was a wedding ring. She was very charming, and Grey was comfortable. He was in his element. His best deferential manners came to the fore. Man of the world and woman of the world, the accidents of the moment had a certain charm for each, and an explanation would doubtless follow.

There was a trite remark the English had made the French *se fiveo'cloquer*, though it was droll how the English statesmen drank tea for their own pleasure (was it a custom? she did not usually intrude like this, Mr. Vurswort? was it?—Mey—rey—deeth, ah! Meyreydeeth would know!) This led to a question if the marquise lived in Paris, and to the rapid interchange of names of acquaintances,

as made by those who wish to ascertain each other's social position or add a new link to the old chain. The marquise had scarcely been in Paris for many years; she had lived in the country with a husband some score of years at least older than herself; and so on. (The rest of the story, being a lie, need not to the reader's confusion be recorded. She did not remark that she had been twice married, once, for a few weeks, before Paul Wordsworth's time, and again many years later.)

Then a pause.

"Is it really that Mr. Wordsworth is not here? anywhere? I understood that he would come. You will know that it is because he is old friend as you say, ver' dear old friend. I would not give the name—he does not know it since my

mariage—and I would, too, give him one surprise, or else I would have been more *convenable* and have asked him to come to me! But I like to do things—a little *extraordinaires*.”

Grey rang at this. It was a different thing if Paul really knew the lady and had merely not recognized her or her name as announced.

The servant was quite decided this time, and gave the message in such a way that the lady should not know it was left after her presence had been known.

“I found Mr. Wordsworth was out, sir. He had left a message that he hoped you’d stay to dinner, sir, when he’d be back.”

Grey nodded dismissal. The lady had risen.

"Can you trust me with your message?
I am sure the chief——"

"You call him the chief—but I do remember he had always the air of a great man, and he is become so now."

"Yes. He's getting on."

"He does deserve it."

"That he does."

"You are enthusiastic for him; that is ver' good. A good boy, you say in English. You will yourself come and see me—to-morrow, and pass away the English Sunday a little. Here is my address. But, stay, you will not give it to your uncle?"

"I will bring him with me, if he is in town."

"Ah! no; if he has not known I was here, I will surprise him somehow. I

must think. But he ran away when he heard of a lady——”

Grey laughed. “Yes, he did. But he thought it was one of those dreadful begging women; he does not know it was a friend.”

“Then you will tell him it was a begging woman. See! here is a penny. You will give me that piece to get r-rid of me. You will say you *did* give me money! And to-morrow you will come and see me, and we will make your uncle a little surprise. It is so good to see again any one who you think is dead, and whom you have lofed—liked—what is your English word, *aimer*? I know your English so little.”

“Pour Madame la Marquise il n’y a qu’une traduction,” rejoined Grey.

“Comment? Vous parlez français? But

I must speak your English—it is so good to speak English—and it is to you not ver' difficile to understand me.”

“I would like—love—another opportunity of trying, madame,” said Grey.

“Bravo! you have the grace of a Frenchman; pardon the compliment against your nationality. You are again good boy,” she said, as she left the room. At the carriage door she repeated: “Do not tell your uncle till we have made our surprise.”

Grey promised compliance. Paul returned. He was full of business and places, and only casually asked: “What did you do with your guest?”

“Gave her tea and a trifle for her cause. I could do no less,” answered Grey readily. “She said she knew you

years ago, and seemed disappointed that I was your *locum tenens*."

"Anybody I care to remember I contrive to hear of from time to time," answered Paul; "but one man is as good as another to a beggar. I ought to repay your loss in my cause. How much?"

"How much? Not worth mentioning, especially as I had some amusement out of it."

"Glad to hear it. A good many collecting women come, or try to come, at unconscionable hours, but I have never had *that* out of any of them."

"If she comes again you shall entertain her," suggested Grey. "She is really awfully good looking, and a cheery woman, I'm sure."

“Then what on earth did she come here for? at this hour?”

“To see you.”

“She didn’t, and won’t, I am afraid. Now about——,” and here followed the normal talk of that date.



CHAPTER XVI.

ATROPOS.

"Clotho colum retinet: Lachesis net: Atropos occat."

By no means had Paul exaggerated the effect produced on him by the letter of Carstairs. It was with the greatest of anxiety that he went down to Temple next morning, and, passing the little church just at noon, as he walked from the station, he met the congregation coming out.

Town had been murky and grim. Here everything was crisp and sparkingly white from the least possible dusting of snow; a hoar-frost with brilliant sun and bright though pale sky; around the village church a loitering country congregation,

with subdued, yet contented Sunday air, casting as it passed doubtful glances at the few men lounging outside on the bridge over the mill stream.

Last of all came Vera, dressed in black trimmed with heavy furs, and wearing a thick veil. Paul moved behind the lychgate, so that she should not see him till he was close to her.

An old man greeted her, with a face like a pippin, leaning on his stick, except when he emphasized a point by sticking it in the ground. Paul could not now see her, but knew that she stopped just within the gate.

The old man's voice was loud and cheerful—too cheerful perhaps!

“Sir Ralph's no better, my lady, I hear. Dear, dear! we *do* think of you!”

"Thank you," was the reply in a low trembling tone. "It is very good of you, Jenkins. We all have our troubles, you see."

"Eh! eh! for sure, for sure. But the rich should enjoy their portion in *this* world, 'tis but fair that. And be it true that Sir Ralph is going off his head? Dear! dear! 'Tis all the talk, surely."

"Oh, what wicked people!" exclaimed Vera, the distress in her tone making it firm and clear again.

"I meant no harm, my lady. Folks do talk."

She brushed past him and out at the gate, but as she rapidly walked to the left, away from the few remaining loiterers, Paul followed and overtook her at the side entrance into the park. It was a door into

a wall, cutting off the wood from the high road. In a moment they were alone on a little path through the hoar-crowned trees. She broke down.

"I can't help it. I went to try and get a little rested and the service upset me."

"Wretched old man!"

"Did you hear?"

"Yes. But don't let idle gossip distress you. You can't help people talking; we have all been said to be off our heads some time," he answered, trying to make her smile; though he had been struck to hear his own idea in the gaffer's mouth as village talk.

"I have had so little sleep," she said, trying to excuse herself for the tears which kept falling.

"Poor child! how you have suffered. Cry, if it does you good."

"No, but I am so tired and so helpless."

"Put up your veil. The air will do you good. No one can see you."

"It is a poor welcome to give you," she answered, obeying him without thought how the morning sun showed the lines of suffering and care and the new traces of tears.

"You could not give me a better welcome, now, as things are," he said. "Do you think it is nothing to me that you will even for a moment let me share your sorrows? If I could but help you! You must know *how* I feel towards you and your husband," he added with lame hastiness and bitter self-reproach. The tone, much more than the words, had been

unguarded—he knew it. He had made her look up, and he saw her flush. But his only fear then—he confessed it years later—his terror then was that she would not trust him any longer. He had stayed away for fear of this.

As they stood still together, a little bright-breasted bird lit before them and peered inquisitively into their faces: they were so quiet.

It was one of those eloquent silences in which some of love's best thoughts are expressed. The deep stillness of their hearts was unbroken by any sound on the sunlit sabbath-quieted uplands, only, with a little momentary patter, as once and again the slight snow slid from the trees.

It was a supremely difficult moment—not to be represented by any words spoken

of or by the two; simply Paul knew that she knew he loved her.

She spoke first--words that might mean anything or nothing; they only answered what he had actually said.

"I know you do feel for us . . . But we must go on. It is very lovely, but he will be waiting for us."

She could not govern her voice at all. Nor could he check himself, if he wished to.

"Stop one moment!" he said hastily and gravely. "Sometimes frankness is best--especially with a woman so true, so good and so dear as yourself--"

"No, don't speak," she cried.

"You are not afraid of me, are you, dear?" he asked wonderfully gently. He retreated a step from her side. "Never be afraid of me."

"I am not," she said in a low tone.

"I have no reason to be."

"*I* have been afraid of myself, and *I* shall be, dear; but *you* . . . you shall only take all that helps you in my love for you; I think I could help you, and nothing shall ever hurt you in it; neither my deeds nor the world's talk; you shall have all that you care to have of my life; I only ask to be the friend you need and will need. Is that too much to ask?"

"I can give you nothing—Ralph's wife," she almost murmured.

"I know that you are his wife. How should I insult either of us by asking you to forget it—in any way? The deepest convictions that I have teach me lessons, that life tries to undo, of the

sacredness of womanhood, and I know, I feel, that *you* realize all I have imagined. Your loyalty has been tried and has triumphed before now; would——”

“Stop a moment!” she interrupted as the words rolled from his lips, like himself in their mixture of far-reaching consideration, with intensity of present feeling. “You do not know!”

“You do not know! what?”

She was agitated now. “Yes; I do trust you; I know you will be true; but you do not know how things are with us now.”

“I stayed away purposely, pretending business, or rather, not forcing even an hour or two’s leisure, but I saw it was no good. I could not bear to think of you all alone. I had to come and see if

I could be of use to Carstairs. I tell you what it is, if I could serve him for you, I'd not join the Cabinet."

She uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"I mean it. Let us go on. We can talk as we walk, and I won't begin by making you late now. You see I know all your hours. I made Grey tell me what he could. I think of you night and day. If you and Carstairs would travel I would go with you anywhere, and care for him like a brother. I'd let everything go. My public work is, after all, mere self-seeking."

It was a wildly-generous scheme, inconsistent with former protestations of shielding their friendship from the world's tongue. "*Why* did Paul Wordsworth not join the Cabinet?" would be the talk of

the empire. But it was put forward impulsively in the true chivalric spirit which always inspires a few lovers in each age; Paul meant what he said.

One moment of eager hope and vivid imagination for her, as she pictured the change—the control of Ralph by his friend, the companionship for herself—and then she knew it was quite impossible.

“You must not do that,” she said.
“But you may try to persuade him to leave this. I don’t like to do so, because it seems such selfishness.”

“How?”

“As if I wanted it for my own sake.”

“You do, I think.”

“I want change, but do not wish for it.”

“What do the doctors say now?”

“They seem at fault. They cannot dis-

cover the cause of the bodily illness, and his mind——”

“Is affected?” he said, as she paused.

She was silent for a moment with a shudder. Then she said, “You mustn’t misunderstand, only perhaps *you* had better know before you see him. He suffers from insomnia, and when he sleeps has fearful dreams. At night he wanders a little; he has only done that once in the daytime; but he says strange things, and has given orders which make the servants and the village people talk. I think I am glad you should see him.”

“He wrote last night—I got the letter then—asking me down, but it was a very strange letter. I could not write or telegraph to you on Sunday, so I came.”

“You will tell me what you think. I

have said this to no one, but *that* is what is so awful to look forward to. I fear our doctor thinks, perhaps, it will be so."

"Has he seen others? You told me so."

"Yes."

"Do you know of any cause? I don't ask curiously. Don't answer."

She had hesitated, and crimsoned again.

"I think that I should like to tell you. It is my foolishness, perhaps."

"To tell me?"

"No, to think it. But it is true. No, I can't tell you. I know that I had better not."

She had a great longing to tell Paul what she knew had been the deciding bent towards this mental alienation which they dreaded, but shamefastness made her hesitate, and that rightly, to speak of her hus-

band's devotion to the woman who could have met his love with hers. How could she tell any one—years after she did tell Paul Wordsworth—of these miserable cross purposes? Then — years afterwards — he told her of the day before Georgie's death.

Now they both kept silence.

“I have never asked you to call me by my Christian name when we are alone,” he said suddenly. “Will you do so? There are so few—none now—I think, to do it.”

“Except everybody,” she observed, with a smile.

“Except everybody, as you say. In the north I never get prefix or affix, I'm ‘just plain Paul,’ as they say. I should be in terror of my life from one of my constituents if I heard *him* say Mr. Words-

worth, and even Paul Wordsworth would be a come-down after the royal Paul by which one is dragged about."

They were just in sight of the shrubbery now. It was really a fifteen minutes' walk across the park and by the wood to the side gate, but they had made it longer. Vera would not have hurried even if Paul had not joined her; her Sunday morning was her weekly holiday.

"I did not expect you to-day," she said, "but it won't take long to get your own rooms ready for you. Are you come to stay?"

They both smiled at that.

"Only till that dreadful morning train, as usual. How I do hate early rising!"

They were both inclined to talk trifles now, to get their voices steady before enter-

ing the house. A few remarks followed having no bearing on the personages of my story. Then they got to the library window, and, looking in, saw Carstairs and his valet. The man opened the window and let them in.

It was pitiful to see Carstairs. The lids were half closed; those mocking eyes had given such character to the face. More than this, the whole bearing of the man was that of an invalid, and a flabby stoutness had taken the place of the stalwart compactness. The valet had told him that her ladyship and Mr. Wordsworth were there, and when the window was opened he was on his feet; without the self-confident bearing and aggressive decision of movement he was almost irrecognizable.

“Where is Mr. Carstairs?”

"Gone out a few minutes since to meet you, my lady."

Question and answer took place whilst Paul greeted Carstairs.

"Let us go out a little. The sun is delicious," said Vera to her husband.

"You should have come sooner if you wanted me to go out."

"We have half-an-hour before luncheon," he said, ignoring the fact that if he so took it into his head he would forbid her to come, and, in any case, since the previous Sunday she had not left him.

"Will you come with me, Wordsworth? You'll have to give me your arm, you know."

"With the greatest of pleasure."

"I don't want you, Vera."

They went out together.

That evening the doctor "strolled in," as he said, and whilst he was with Carstairs Vera came to Paul and said: "Ask him to tell you frankly what he thinks. Perhaps he'll tell you more than he would say to me."

Left alone with Paul the doctor required no drawing out. "I thought you'd have been down before," he said. "Anyhow, yours is a good opinion as to appearances. What do you think?"

They had some earnest and pitying talk together, the doctor giving details and answering freely Paul's inferential questions.

"Then what is the present state of affairs?" Paul said at length; "as you say you have very little hope of his recovery."

"It is not what *I* say," replied the doctor, poking the fire vigorously, under

cover of which noise Vera entered behind one of the screens of books. "But to you I can say this, so far as all the doctors agree Sir Ralph has two alternatives before him—remember this is in confidence—and we may all be wrong, the human body is a most mysterious arrangement——"

"Yes, yes, but——"

"There are two alternatives," repeated the doctor, with his beard on one side, and regarding Paul Wordsworth. "Two alternatives—one, the tendency to mental alienation is strong."

"Then is it not the worst thing he can do to remain here;——"

"True. But for the other. It is possible that we can overcome that if we could control the bodily disorder, and that we might do did we really understand it. It's

my opinion that ——— knows as much about it as I do ; that is, that we can only guess what is wrong. In plain terms—unless some miracle happens—Sir Ralph will either live for many years with gradual loss of faculty, you understand, or die in a few months at most—it may be sooner. So far as we can see nothing can save him.”

“Nothing can save him !” said Paul, horror-struck. “I thought him seriously ill, but not——”

“He is worse than ill ; remember you have seen him when quiet. An egotistical, self-indulgent man makes a bad subject for mental disorders.”

“You think there is brain disease? . . . What’s that?”

Vera came before them, deadly white,

but speaking with unwonted strength and vigour.

“I came in just as you were speaking. I have a right to hear what you say of my husband. How dare you have kept it from me? I sent for all of you to learn the truth. I hear now that part you cannot, part you dare not, tell me. Tell me to my face at once——”

“The conversation was not meant for your ears, Lady Carstairs,” answered the doctor. “I am afraid you have misunderstood——”

“I came in as you said [what I wanted to know, what, of all human beings, I have the right to know—that is why I did not tell you I was there. But what does that matter now? Repeat to me what you said. I will tell you,” she continued, as he was

silent--“I will tell you. My husband must *die*—or live *mad*—and not one of you knows why, or has courage to tell his wife.”

“Or *himself*!” roared a voice behind them.

The door had been left open by Vera, and she had raised her voice in her agonized eloquence. Charlie had been bringing his brother downstairs, and before he knew who was there they had heard the words after the pause.

“Or himself! They are entering into a plot to say I am mad. Where are they? Let me get at them,” repeated Carstairs, furiously.

He struck the furniture near with his stick.

“Calm yourself, Sir Ralph. Lady Carstairs has misunderstood; her anxiety as a wife made her too anxious; it’s a mistake.”

“Don’t lie to me. Vera! come here!

nearer, so that I can touch you ! Then *you* tell me the truth."

"Carstairs!" said Paul. Charlie had stood still, perfectly useless. The door was open, and the noise had attracted butler and footman to the hall—no one knew it. The scene just within the room was too full of horror for all the actors.

"Carstairs ! give me your stick, and let me take you to a chair. Then we can talk more comfortably," said Paul in steadied tone.

"No doubt you'll talk comfortably. I'm dying or mad? Where's my dear wife? My dear, dear wife? If I'd my eyes I'd kill her, and I will too," he roared.

He tried to run furiously across the room, but missed his direction.

"Take Vera away, Charlie!" said Paul,

the name slipping out, as all his thoughts were first for her and how to put an end to this terrible scene.

He and the doctor caught Sir Ralph, but as they moved or bore him to the centre of the room he became rigid and unconscious.

"Not the first time this," whispered the doctor as they laid him down.

They loosened his clothes.

"Go away!" said the doctor, with a sudden change of face even from that he had worn. He rose suddenly.

"What can I get?" said Vera.

Paul and the doctor exchanged one look. She saw that look, and before Paul turned to her she knew. With a bitter cry she fell beside her husband's dead body. The shock had hastened the end.

CHAPTER XVII.

GREY'S CHOICE.

“ Like cliffs which had been rent asunder,
A dreary sea now flows between;
But neither heat, nor frost, nor thunder,
Shall wholly do away, I ween,
The marks of that which once hath been.”

Christabel.

AND now this tale tells itself in little snatches, but the streams of our lives sometimes run underground for many a mile—our real existence, that is to say. This and that and the other is done, but our own loved part of life (if we are spiritually rich enough to have any part to love), that is laid aside, out of other people's reach, it is true, but also out of ours. We exist till again we have time to live; who but ourselves in our own bitterness

know the difference between the two states of being—where one begins and another ends?

So Paul Wordsworth existed for three months, full of business, full of excitement, full of all that could make a member's life useful and honourable. The triumphant sweep of the election, the renewed enthusiasms consequent on entrance into leadership once more, all the keenness which, if it exists at all, is chiefly felt in the first months of office; those facts were what the world saw, and Paul Wordsworth was before the world morning, noon and night.

But his thoughts turned, as the busiest man's thoughts can turn, and his pen or pencil wrote, as the hardest worker can write, to the woman he loved.

He saw little of Grey Meredith; Grey had left him and lived another life. They met in the House, Grey professedly held himself as an independent member; perhaps that to him meant, not walking into Opposition lobbies on occasion but, making off between important divisions with the greatest of ease and with no conscientious scruples or unhealthy ambition. He was in for this parliament, and did not intend to seek re-election.

Grey's present object in life was his attendance on any pretty woman who took his fancy for the moment. Amongst others—chief amongst them—he had very greatly improved his acquaintance with the marquise, who had stayed for the pre-Easter season at a private hotel in one of the streets off Piccadilly. She had good

introductions, and Grey especially made it pleasant for her.

Paul Wordsworth had gone to the official residence attached to his portfolio. He did not happen to meet the marquise, and Grey did not now trouble his head about the pretext on which they had made acquaintance. She and Grey were again having tea together one day shortly before the recess. The days were lengthening, and she complained of the light, which was neither one thing nor another. Easter fell as late as it possibly could that year. Grey went to the bow window.

“There’s Paul Wordsworth coming down the street.”

“Where?” she said, and came to look.

“You don’t want to renew your acquaintance now?”

“Ah! do I not? That Sunday, which was so dreadful you said, when his friend did die in his arms, we would have seen him. But, after that, we did somehow put off. But he enters. I will——”

“I’ll go and fetch him.”

“He cannot know that I am here. You have betrayed me.”

“Of course not. Your wishes were law!”

(As if Grey could have told Paul Wordsworth anything except that the lady was agreeable and amusing!)

Grey darted out of the room and found Wordsworth talking to the proprietor of the hotel.

“Hullo! chief! want you for a minute!”

“I have an engagement.”

“Shan’t keep you. The Marquise Scalchi wants you to come in. She has never seen

you since she came to England. She called that day you went out to avoid a begging woman, and it would be awfully rude of you not to come for a moment."

"I tell you I don't know her--never heard the name."

"Come for a moment. She knows you, has asked me about you every day. It is only in the hotel."

Wordsworth did not wish to say that Vera was in the hotel also. To get rid of Grey he consented to be triumphantly marched upstairs. There was a transformation scene as to light in the few moments of Grey's absence. Blinds were drawn and shaded lamps in the room counterfeited light. Even in that light or shade Grey could see a good deal more than he could understand.

He entered with Wordsworth, linking his arm into the "chief's."

"I have brought him, marquise," he began, when he saw the lady stop—she had come forward with outstretched hands and welcomes on her lips—and he felt Paul disengage himself and also stop. Grey remained between the two.

Paul addressed him instantly, "I told you that I thought there had been a mistake; I am sure of it now; and can only apologize to madame for my intrusion on that ground."

Formally bowing he left the room.

Grey, utterly bewildered, as well he might be, stammered, "Marquise, what is this?"

"It means that he insults me before you all," she answered. Then Grey saw

that a lady and another man were also present; both very uncomfortable, having indeed nothing to do with the scene except that they had witnessed it—and would talk of it.

“As to that, he shall explain matters to me, Marquise, and at once. He——”

Grey went out, and the other visitors excused themselves. They were staying in the hotel, and were but slight acquaintances who, meeting the marquise at some mutual friend's, had been asked by her to come and see her at tea-time. She did not attempt to detain them, though they evidently made the remark on the spur of the moment that they had only come in to say that they could *not* come. She waited for Gréy to return.

He caught Wordsworth at the foot of

the stairs. The marquise had rooms on the first floor.

Grey stopped him, speaking in a low tone. "I have come to ask you to explain your insult to my hostess."

"Don't meddle with what you do not at all understand," answered Paul.

"I mean to understand it so far as this—I am reponsible for your presence and your behaviour——"

"I have no time to waste, Grey," said Wordsworth impatiently.

"Then I consider your conduct quite un——"

"Nonsense! don't keep me. Ask Madame whatever she calls herself for an explanation, and believe her if you like," he said. "It is sufficient for me that I do not know the lady."

“But——”

Wordsworth looked at Grey with calm contempt—the large dog’s disregard of the pertinacious puppy. Then he said slowly, “You forget yourself! You have no right to call *me* to account. Leave me.”

The sharp decisive tone in which the last two words were spoken attracted the attention of two men in the hall; at that moment the lady and her husband came down from upstairs, Wordsworth and Grey let them pass. Then Grey said: “This is not the place ——”

“Neither is yours the cause in which to speak.”

“I’ll postpone it ——”

Wordsworth left him and returned to the office. “Give me a sheet of paper.”

He wrote to Lady Carstairs a hurried

line, telling her he would try to come in that evening, and left the hotel; not blessing Grey for his interference with five spare minutes—all he had—and angrily marvelling at the impudence of a certain lady.

Perhaps he always had been a little too careless of any explanations of his personal conduct; he cared perchance too little for “idle caws.”

Meanwhile, already, before Grey had returned to the marquise, the two men in the hall had heard the story of Wordsworth's behaviour, and the witnesses had gained the certainty that their surmise was correct—“It *was* Mr. Wordsworth, the minister.”

This, as it stood, was the ground of a pretty little sensational story which ran

round town, in various versions, of a quarrel between the minister and his nephew about a lady whose name was sometimes given as her own, sometimes—if the recounter knew Grey—as that of any other woman to whom he had paid attention. It cropped up for years and years.

But the real consequent scenes were not uninteresting—at least to those who, like the narrator, may have a sort of sneaking kindness for fickle, good-looking Grey. It is a year since we began to follow his fortunes at Milan; he has rather deteriorated than otherwise.

Returning to her room Grey found La Marquise sitting very uprightly in a stiff chair in front of the fire. She that day wore a closely-fitting polonaise or underrobe of dull red brocade with gold threads,

and, opening over this, covering all but the front, a trained velvet gown of a much darker shade; this was bordered with some wondrous Parisian trimming thick as fur, soft and fluffy, blending the two shades of the dress and bordered on either side by balls of bullion gold; a little theatrical, doubtless, but it was a magnificent dress; and as she sat there, with angry eyes and burning cheeks, Grey was afresh stirred to admiration.

This was really the type of woman who had special attraction for him.

But all this was very awkward.

“Well,” she said, “what have you done?”

“It was not quite the place. He has gone now, but I’ll see him afterwards,” hesitated Grey.

She smiled very scornfully. "And what do you think?"

"That, as he said, I don't understand it," answered Grey moodily. "Of course I'm bound to stand up for you."

"Bound? Thank you for nothing, Mr. Meredith. I need no man to be bound to me. If he does not feel the insult for me he can go and listen to any slander that a disappointed—I do not say a dishonoured—man can invent. Go! I do never wish to see you again. You have in yourself deceived me. I know not what he has said to you—but go! I do dismiss you, this moment."

"Not at all!" said Grey between his teeth. He would otherwise have gone, for he knew Wordsworth must have had good reason for ignoring conventionality—even

if he supposed the scene was private—but when she told him to go he realized her power over him.

“I will not go,” he continued. “You speak as if it mattered nothing to me——”

“How! You go not?”

“Not till I hear and can judge.”

“I am no criminal, Mr. Meredith. I will not stoop and say: This I have done: that the man whom I would have *forgiven* has done; sift it all with your cold suspicions, and find me not guilty if you can. You would be my *judge*, would you? Then, I repeat, Go! I am not to be tried by you.”

“And you were listening to me this afternoon,” broke out Grey.

“Well?” she rejoined. “I was. And what then?”

“That then I have a *right* to understand this from you.”

“What?”

“This.”

“What?”

“The chief—after all you have said; your insinuations now——”

“That is easily explained, but I give no explanations to you. Why should I?”

“Because you have led me on in every possible way these three months to believe that I was acceptable to you; because I cannot bear the thought of wrong to you——”

“Ah, now! you talk more like a lover! I will answer my lover—not my judge! Ask my pardon for your insolence—and then we will talk again. Stop! from now

it is a question whom you believe: I or Mr. Wordsworth?"

He hesitated again.

"We will tell you different things. I am a woman, older than you are; I have not yet promised to marry you; my liberty is dear to me, and you could do much better among the beautiful young English girls."

"Don't talk like that," he said shortly.

"I put the question as I will. Your uncle and chief has been to you most kind; you tell me he is honourable and good, and I never have contradicted you one word, have I? I am only a woman for whom you say—I know not the truth—you have a passing fancy: what have I to offer you—that I will give—instead of all that he can do for you? I would that we had been all friends. He is clumsy

or has a bad conscience: you take the alarm, showing you do not love me as you say; and now it is, if you have me you lose him; if you keep him in your honour you must despise me. Go, and hear nothing! I will leave England and you will be at peace."

With dramatic force and splendid movement she had poured out this appeal.

"I answer you," he said. "You are everything to me. Answer me. *When* will you be my wife?"

She swept up to him and put her hands on his shoulders. His face was troubled but resolute.

"I have not said yet that I would marry you, but you are—what I first said you were—a good boy. You are a true Englishman!"

He turned on her almost savagely, catching her hands in his.

“I know what *I* am doing for you. Now tell me the truth.”

“There is so little to tell. It is ‘much ado about nothing!’ He was one who said he loved me about a dozen years ago; he did behave very badly, but I did marry my old marquis, and it did not matter.” (Chronology was not quite accurate, but no matter, for Grey it was good enough.) “I had a fancy to see him again. I had not been before in England, and I did not know it was here anything remarkable to go to see him. I am not so young. And now, though he is coward, and clumsy also, I do not regret that I did go, for I met you there! That is all, my good boy,” she said.

“You are not telling me all,” he answered doggedly.

“I do not go into long details, but I have told you all. If you do not believe me, it is not my loss !”

“Then why did you say I should have to trust him *or* you?”

“Need you say that? You are *bête*, my good boy. That years ago he would have married me is no wrong to you ; but how should you speak to him who has so very clumsily insulted your promised wife?”



CHAPTER XVIII.

APOLOGIA PRO FELICITATE SUA.

“ Only this my mind gave me, that every free and gentle spirit, without that oath, ought to be born a knight.”

Milton.

ANOTHER love scene, two or three hours later, and of a different character! In place of the imperious woman dominating by her vitality the weaker man, and forcing him to retract to himself suspicions, simply by stirring his admiration, there is a strong man showing himself tender and true to the fragile and still suffering woman. Caroline Scalchi was to Vera Carstairs as the imperial tiger-lily to her name-sake of the valley, and Wordsworth to Meredith as the oak to the osier.

Vera heard Paul's step as eight o'clock struck on the tall clock outside. She rose to welcome him, and as the door shut on the announcing waiter, they met in the centre of the room. A light hanging from the ceiling showed her in her widow's dress. She wore no cap. It was only the simplicity of the plain trailing gown which hinted what mourning it was. It revealed, too, that she was slighter and more fragile-looking than ever. Greetings between friends, when they are alone, are often silent, and Paul, not releasing her thin hands, said nothing, except with looks, for a long moment of contemplation. It was very good to be together again—for both.

“I hoped you would be alone.”

“Yes,” she said, as they parted and sat down, “I wanted to see you.”

"I would have come before——"

"I got your note. Anice is with me, but has gone to see her sister and to the theatre. Charlie calls for and will bring her back to me afterwards. So I am alone."

"I must be at the House by nine; isn't it too bad? How long do you stay here?"

"Only for a short time; till the lawyers have finished."

"And then?"

"I feel a waif and a stray. Anice, of course, is to have her season. I can't be so selfish as to keep her longer. I think I shall go back to my own home—where it was, you know. It will soon be lovely in the country. By-and-by I shall do something for other people, but I have to get well first."

“You really are stronger,” he said very eagerly.

“Oh, yes!” she answered.

Up to this point there had been a little constraint upon them both ; they had only seen each other once since the funeral day. Vera had been frightfully ill, but he could not go to her, and, when she was better, the very knowledge of their feeling for each other had kept them apart till a few more weeks of her widowhood had gone by. How and why did they now meet ? Their thoughts were now of each other, but these considerations left unsaid were influencing both of them.

It was even now full early—not four months after her husband’s death—as some may deem, to think of a possible future. But since little Daisy’s death all affection

had seemed to cease on Vera's part; perhaps, without Georgie the last summer, swayed by a sense of duty, she might have won the affection of her husband more permanently than in the brief passion of their marriage. As things had fallen out, was she lonelier in actual widowhood than in nominal married life? For the last three months of illness, terminated by that shock, she had done all that wife could do, borne all that woman could bear from one distressingly ill in mind as in body. He had been used to treat her with verbal brutality, and in his mental and bodily anguish he had not only continued that before the servants, but—perhaps a little unknowing what he did—had inflicted on her even blows in his undisciplined invalidism. It was “only three months” of this. Many

women have had years of the like self-sacrifice and suffering. But she was young, and had known so much trouble already ; and it is a hard lot to bear all the hardest burdens which pity can impose without the extraordinary strength which love can supply. The agony of parting—the afterwards—was *not* as that agony for those who have loved and have been beloved to the last ; but the struggle between life and death had been unbrightened by loving recognition of mutual dread and doubled pain,—of undying affection given and received by each ; the wife had no consolation at all save in the thought : “ I did my best—it was my duty.”

Do you blame her then that, though, being bound, she would never have sought to be loosed,—being free, she so soon turned towards a true, restful affection, as a plant

brought up from the darkness in which it has been kept moves slowly towards the sunshine in the glad summer freshness? Do you blame her? Then you have not yet known the touch of suffering, if you are a woman and can love.

"Oh, yes!" she said, she was stronger.

"Vera," he began then, moving nearer to her, to the couch on which she was seated, coming beside her, "is it not time to let me have some voice in your plans? I wait for you very patiently. I have never yet in so many words told you what I want, but you know it."

"It is so soon."

"Do you call that an answer?"

"You have asked me nothing yet," she whispered, pale no longer, but he could scarcely hear what she said.

"I am not going to ask. I am going to take possession of you, body and soul, and turn a suffering, white-faced, lifeless creature into a strong, happy woman—my wife, when she will! My darling! My own! Poor little 'waif and stray!' Never again that! My God! this happiness is too great for me!"

In Paul Wordsworth's eyes were tears, and his voice was broken.

She said nothing articulate, but she was laughing and crying at once in his strong arms. He understood her perfectly.

Suddenly she released herself.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

She stood upright, and spoke quickly.

"The will! Do you know? My father lost all his money, and I had of my own only £60 a year; if I don't marry again I have £3,000, if I do, only £400 a year, and——"

“And you don’t wish to give that up,” he rejoined, ready to be angry.

“I didn’t know if you knew I had nothing.”

“Do you wish to be shaken?” he asked, laughingly threatening her. “You very absurd child! The country! Do you know,” he imitated her, holding her arms, “the country takes so much of my time and thoughts, and if I did nothing I would have twenty-four hours in the day, but I have not — I have sometimes not twenty-four minutes in the day—and I am nearly twenty years older than you are, and I am a cantankerous bachelor in my habits ; and very proud and stiff; and I have all sorts of other faults: on which defects I had better leave you to meditate, because I must go in five minutes precisely.”

“Mus you?” she said dolefully.

"Don't be afraid that I will ever leave you longer than I can help. When can we be married?"

"Not yet," she answered, a little pained. "I don't think *this* is right."

"Oh, this is better than right! But, my darling, I know. Outsiders shall not hear yet. We will not waste any time in which we might be together out of mere deference to a captious public, but even the very quickest wedding would be out of place yet. It would be selfish to deprive you of your freedom before you have enjoyed it."

"Enjoyed it?"

"Yes. I do feel that you might do much better than marry me."

"I don't," she said brightly. He was gratified.

"Do you know, child, it is all very

well! I spoke as if I were self-confident, but I did not dare to hope. Ever since I knew you first I cared for you, but later on when I saw you were unhappy—especially that day—that Sunday—well! I felt a brute to speak at all. And afterwards I have said to myself she cares for me only as a friend who tried clumsily to be helpful when she was in trouble.”

“I said . . . Paul . . . I said to myself: He is kind because I am unhappy.”

“Were you so blind, child? All last autumn? And now?”

“Last autumn when you gave me that book I prayed that you might not care for me. It made it so hard. I would not let myself think or look.”

“Nor I. But I did not know that I could have made it harder for *you*.”

"You could. You did. But all is well now."

There was silence. "Then," said he, after a pause, "as soon as the world will not think me disrespectful to you in shortening your widowhood——"

"Paul! one can't help laughing when one is sad sometimes, and you are quaint."

"What is wrong?" he asked.

"The way you put it."

"Well, isn't it so? We might be married and spend our Easter recess together next week, but for that stupid talk by people who know our names and nothing else. (It is strange sometimes to think that there is not a creature, in western civilization at least, who does not know of one's name.) They could say nothing that I should mind—except on

your account. So I must wait, my darling, but you will not keep me away longer than you must, will you? It is not as if I were free—look at that wretched clock!”

Even across Constitution Hill, and in January, five minutes is scant measure to get from beyond Piccadilly to the Front Bench at Westminster, there to make the promised “important statement.” Yet, once outside the drawing-room he came back to say again, “Good-bye; I shall write to you from the House to-night.”

Now when Bennett had learnt that Miss Leyton was dead, and that Sir Ralph was blind, probably dying, despite her promise she returned from America and came to London. With her own matchless impudence, meeting Grey (who knew, of course, nothing of the circumstances under which

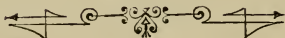
she had left), she informed him she was looking for a place. He told Madame la Marquise how his poor Georgie had valued her maid. The marquise was only too glad to have this "treasure."

So when Wordsworth came out of the drawing-room the first time he ran up against a woman, who drew back into the shadow of another doorway; thence to watch his return and his final going away.

A perfectly unscrupulous woman, with none of a lady's instincts, the marquise had already extracted much of what Bennett had to tell about Lady Carstairs and about Paul Wordsworth. Neither Grey nor Bennett knew that the marquise had any interest in the minister for his own sake.

As Grey was sitting with his "promised

wife" after dinner Bennett came in respectfully and said something to her mistress. After a time said the marquise to Grey: "And if you think so, why not go and see Lady Carstairs whilst I write these notes? She's in the hotel."



CHAPTER XIX.

A B O L D S T R O K E .

“And in his falsèd fancie he her takes
To be the fairest wight that livèd yit ;
Which to express he bends his gentle wit.

Faerie Queen.

AFTER Paul had gone the moments for Vera seemed to pass in a dream—a happy dream, vague exquisite ease of soul: such moments as we only know very briefly and very unexpectedly. They come when “all is well”—perhaps when we are in keenest sympathy with the glory of nature, perhaps when we are in deepest union with the nobler purposes of man’s destinies. It is not often that restfulness—that sense of harmony with happiness—comes to any mortal, and when it does it comes to those

who have made the best of sorrow, and therefore for them the best of joy is made.

Vera was very happy, and though in the London street there were noises that were loud enough to one who had for nine months been in the country, all round her there seemed to be a hush of strengthening calm. Her life no longer lonely, and his to be fulfilled!

Prosaic interruption: 9.30, letters. One, a lawyer's letter for Lady Carstairs. Put aside till to-morrow. Miss Anice Bentley. Sir Charles Carstairs. Vera looked at this last address for a moment, not thinking of the letter. A new thought suggested itself. Charlie was not of age. What complications would be made by her marriage, if she married at the end of the

year? "One good thing is, this shock and this six months' trial have sobered him," she thought, "and for his marriage—if, by-and-by, he thinks of Anice Bentley. . ."

Only those three letters and a card pencilled:

*Am in hotel. Just heard you're here.
May I come in?*

MR. GREY MEREDITH, M.P.

The Carform Club, Pall Mall, S.W.

She now saw that her servant waited for an answer.

"Certainly; I shall be very glad to see Mr. Meredith. Where is he?"

"He is dining in the hotel, my lady. A courier is waiting outside to take back the message."

In a few minutes more Grey came in, with warm greeting and looking his best.

He was trying to tone down his feeling of happiness to conform to his part of the erewhile blighted lover, of which the sight of Vera reminded him by her past connection with Georgie, and also to suit the surroundings of Vera's widowhood.

As the old plays direct, they both tried "*to dissemble.*" Grey was just the person who should not hear of the apparently early engagement. Grey, however, only wanted an opportunity of telling Vera of the marquise. To do so seemed a little hard, a little curious, considering everything (but *he* did not consider everything, being once more as genuinely in love as he could be).

He sat down, talked commonplace cheerily, inwardly relieved to find her so ready for it, and then :

“ I daresay you'll be surprised to hear something about me.”

(He had a vague remembrance of having used the phrase eight or nine months before, but this time he had derived an inspiration from his *fiancée*, and his attraction to Vera was to him quite a memory. He naturally liked the imperial type of woman much better than the sympathetic; Vera was very charming, but Caroline was splendid. He did not falter now, except out of deference to those trailing black robes, so very gloomy and severe; he liked rich stuffs and harmonized colours.)

“ Surprised?” said Vera. “ Good news, I hope ? ”

“ I want you to judge for yourself. I think so. I am going to marry a most charming woman; she accepted me this

evening. You're the only soul who knows it, but I wanted to tell you first thing. Wish me good luck!"

"And who is she? I do wish you all happiness, Grey. Any one I know?"

"She's not English, but speaks English charmingly. A widow. Her last husband was of very old French family—died four years ago. I think a woman is quite justified in marrying again after four years' time, don't you?"

"I suppose so," said Vera a little nervously. Grey thought he had said the wrong thing in talking of a second marriage to a young widow.

"She is the Marquise Scalchi."

"Oh! a very good name, I know. A Provençal family, isn't it? Mirabel Scalchi was a young diplomat who once came to

show us the lions in Rome, attached to the French Embassy to the Quirinale. Perhaps a relation."

"Very likely. She knows all about you. I have told her so much, and I should like you to be friends. I think she's older than you are. If you see a very handsome woman coming from the first floor, foreign-looking I suppose you'd call her, that's Cara. I've called her marquise till to-day."

"Cara!" repeated Vera. "It is a pretty name, La Marquise Cara Scalchi. You know that I am seeing no one, but you must introduce me to her some day. Does your uncle know?"

"No," said Grey flushing, but Vera did not notice. "Cara" would be her niece by marriage! "They have met abroad,

but you know the chief doesn't care much for women, and they didn't get on then it appears. Anyhow, this afternoon when I wanted to introduce him to her (I was not accepted definitely then) he was positively rude. I wish you would take him in hand sometimes about his manner to ladies."

"Perhaps he was pre-occupied this afternoon. He is very busy," said Vera, remembering Grey had prevented Wordsworth coming to her.

"Business shouldn't make a man a bear. Who thanks him? I told him I couldn't and wouldn't stand the life. You don't know what it is."

"I think I do."

"Yes, I suppose Carstairs would have been in this Cabinet," he said, only thinking

of what he was going to say: "I have a favour to ask you. I don't like to ask you such a thing, but I shan't be surprised a bit if you said no. We've always been friends—for years and years."

"Tell me what you want, Grey."

She was sure of her position now. He was engaged—her nephew in future.

"I don't like to. But you'll say no? Candidly?"

"If I can't do it. What is it?"

"I wonder if I might bring Cara to see you now, to-night? I know you aren't seeing people, but I do want you to know her. And I'd like it to be the first day it's settled."

"But, Grey, it is late."

"Only ten o'clock."

"And I ought to go to her. Men never

understand all these things, Grey, you know," she said lightly.

"You haven't so high opinion of me as has our chief. I know women have to be on a lot of ceremony. But she has heard all about you, and, in fact, she said I was to come and see you, and—she's not pushing, you know. Her position is too assured for that. But I know she'd come now—only for a few minutes. In fact," he repeated, "we both should like it, if you were well enough. But if you'd rather not, say no. It is for you to decide. It's my fault if the offer shouldn't have been made."

"If she is good enough to care to come so informally," answered Vera. "I should not like to ask her to do so. I don't think that she *could* come, Grey.

It would be so impertinent of *me* to ask it—especially as she is not a girl.”

“If you don’t mind, may *I* ask her?”

“*You* may. But the marquise ——”

“It’s awfully good of you. Sure you don’t mind?”

He went off.

“You have been some time,” said the marquise. “Well?”

“Will you come with me?”

“She will not think it curious?”

“She was afraid that you would. But I said it was my doing.”

“And you are sure Mr. Wordsworth said nothing?”

“I told you he couldn’t. I saw him leave the hotel.”

“But he is since returned. He was with her an hour to-night.”

“She evidently ‘heard’ nothing.”

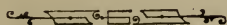
“That is right. Then if you are sure you ‘did’ take it to your own shoulders that you were so *empresé* we will descend. I would see your so dear friend—your playmate—sister of the old days, and I would not that she should be first set against me. I feel to know her so well.”

It was a bold game this, which Grey unconsciously furthered. Bennett, in confidence, had imparted to the marquise the whole of the story, including that of the letter picked up.

The marquise (unknowing how that very letter had been addressed to herself—one which she had been *forced* to give up) thought that in this she held a reserve of trumps. She intended no harm in particular. Now she hated Wordsworth; for

the rest she was actuated by the spirit of curiosity and sensationalism, and also by a desire to see Vera whilst Vera was unprepared.

Grey had done well. He had found out for her that Vera had no reasons for refusing to receive the Marquise Scalchi, and had made it possible—when under the circumstances it seemed impossible—for both ladies without loss of dignity to make each other's acquaintance in somewhat uncere- monious fashion. Yet, in spite of his mediatory position, it may be truly said he did not know what women he was introducing to each other.



CHAPTER XX.

THE END OF AN EPOCH.

“He proceeded on his pilgrimage with new energy and felt more and more as if authentically consecrated to the same.”—*Carlyle*.

“True is, that true love hath no power to looken back.”—*Spenser*.

MOST love affairs on the surface have some element of the ludicrous about them; few, however ludicrous in aspect, are ridiculous to the core. Vera had something to smile at in thinking that in one year Grey had made a declaration of platonic affection to herself, had been taken possession of by poor Georgie, and had finally come to beg her to receive this object of his new passion in such eager haste and uncere-monious form. Something more to be sad

about in the disillusioning of an early dream, and in the penetration of experience; even Anice now knew Grey's weaknesses. It was over a year since the party had met whose fortunes thenceforward were to be so straitly intertwined—all had developed from the beginning at Como, and even the later introduction to Paul Wordsworth (though certain to have occurred otherwise) in some way was traceable to the night on the calm moonlit lake.

Was Lady Carstairs not a little foolish to receive this unknown woman thus? Grey liked good-looking women; that she was handsome was the only fact Vera knew about the marquise.

Vera smiled again to think that twice she herself had the honour of attracting

this connoisseur of female beauty; and sighed because even Paul had called her a "white-faced thing." "What an old woman I look!" she said, for once looking at herself in the glass, and scanning anxiously the new lines, the sharpened features of her own face with anxious despondent look. *She* did not recognize how quietly beautiful it was now, nor could foretell what happiness would do for her still ripening loveliness.

If Vera had no preconceived idea of the marquise, that lady had all the disadvantages of having to correct previous impressions of Lady Carstairs—formed not from Grey's praises, but from the scandalous and envious sketches of an evil-tongued servant. Up to the lover-like return and the lover-like tone of Words-

worth's last words that night, so far as Bennett had invented or had observed the relations between the minister and his colleague's wife and widow, the marquis believed that she had known the history of that connection.

It was with a feeling of contempt, I think, though with much outward courtesy and charm, that Caroline responded to Vera's quietly gracious and very graceful welcome.

That slight girl—that pale, puny creature—to be the woman of Wordsworth's later choice; his *later* choice; the secret heroine of that story certainly verging on scandal—a preference in her husband's lifetime, an apparent haste to shorten widowhood! Caroline scanned the face of Vera to ask for herself the secret question, “bad and

silly, or good and foolish?" She had no data on which to base any other alternative. Caroline was shrewd enough and quick to read character for practical purposes, and she knew well that on that face there was a look of exquisite purity which no woman of the world has by accident and which no woman can consciously preserve. The countenance did not tally with her information, with the secrets she supposed herself to hold, and though Caroline did not like a really good woman, in spite of herself she was not contemptuous for long.

Vera was greatly surprised to see a woman so matured. "She must be fifteen years older than Grey at least; I *don't* like her, but *how* she inspires him!"

This measurement of forces went on

during five minutes' conversation between the trio, in which all performed their parts with due sense of the position of each—so far as this was known.

Then, drawing a comparison very favourable to the marquise between her and the slight black-robed figure at her side, Grey asked if they were keeping Vera up.

“No; the others won't be back till after eleven. I shall wait to see Charlie; he is not staying with us.”

“I wonder if I ought not to go down to the House,” asked Grey. “It's got on without me to-night, but——”

“Certainly,” said the marquise, “Lady Carstairs will perhaps talk to me for a very few little minutes without you, if it does not tire her, and then we will say to each other, good-night.”

Grey thought that a trio does not become intimate rapidly. Vera was the only one who preferred it to a duet. Yet she could but say :

“It is very good of you to stay with me, marquise.”

Grey went off. The two women were alone.

Caroline wished to establish herself with Vera before Wordsworth could interfere ; it was a bold *coup de main*, but the only way out of an awkward position. Grey was most amenable, and even sacrificed a private good-night to his *fiancée's* previously expressed desire to be left alone with Lady Carstairs.

“Now, I am not to tire you, Lady Carstairs,” said the marquise. “Grey has told me how very delicate you are. Will

you not recline a little on the *chaise longue*?"

"I am very much better now. Shall I put this screen for you?" Vera asked, and rose to move it. The marquise rose also, and caught her by both hands:

"Do not think me very strange. But I am so a thing of impulse. I have all my life, for good or for evil, done a thing very suddenly, though sometimes I have been sorry."

This was true. Caroline did act on impulse and spoilt her plots many a time. Vera did not quite know what to do, so let the marquise continue:

"But I shall not be so now. Will you be my friend? It is very sudden, but you will a little for Grey's sake care for me?"

("Don't trust her, don't trust her," said

instinct; but kindness said, “she is foreign and means well; dont be ungracious!”)

“You are very kind to say this; we are all interested in Grey’s happiness.”

“I do think you will mean more than you will yet say of goodness; I do not expect too much of the English words, but the English hearts are so good and true; and you have done so much to receive me *sans cérémonie* this evening.”

She sat down again.

“And I forget—excuse me—but what relation is my Grey to you?”

“None,” said Vera colouring.

“None!” ejaculated the marquise with surprise well feigned. “I thought you to have been dear cousins.”

“He has very few relations, and we are very old friends.”

“It was my mistake. I beg pardon. I would not have intruded, but I understood—so strange—you were indeed relations. He has so warmly spoken of you!”

“It is not an important mistake,” said Vera.

“It has to me given a great pleasure, so I do not regret my error. And Mr. Wordsworth there is also no relative of yours?”

“He is Grey’s uncle.”

“Ah! so strange. I thought I had heard his name with yours. But English names are so difficult to us, and my poor Grey has been a little preoccupied lately. When at first he used to talk of his friends I did not know it would one day so much concern me—and so I have to make a great *salade* of every one. Mr.

Wordsworth I have known many, many years ago."

"You have not yet renewed your acquaintance?" asked Vera, then remembering that Grey had said something about it.

"I tried to to-day, but he was quite *farouche*; and then I remembered that we had parted in great anger—a *stupide* quarrel. But he seemed to be in a very great hurry. It is the same to me—if he is *bête*. But I do not like the too political men, they are very vindictive and very *rusés*, they do not serve well for lovers. I did find him when he was in Paris very fickle. But, Lady Carstairs, you make me to forget we are almost strangers. I begin to talk to you of an old love! And it can be no interest to you

—he is but the uncle of your friend, my Grey!”

“How long ago did you know Mr. Wordsworth?”

“Very long time,” answered the marquise carelessly, not apparently seeing Vera’s too obvious concealment of interest.

“But to-morrow we will perhaps meet. There are many friends whom we do both know, probably. And I would hear how you do know my Grey so well—oh! I am not *jalouse!*”

“Will you——”

“No, I will go. You will be tired of this too intrusive woman. Do you think that Grey will be happy with me? You are a cautious English woman. Will you let me kiss you and then I will go?”

“I am English, as you say, marquise,” answered Vera firmly, withholding herself; “good-night.”

It was an effort of courage to refuse the kiss of the marquise; for be it remembered the marquise was in age and position—and in audacity—the person to make advances.

“You are very sincere, *ma chère* lady; when you know me a little more you *shall* be friend of mine.”

The door opened and Wordsworth entered. The Government had permitted a count-out; not specially that one of its chiefs might come back for a few minutes to a certain hotel, but such was the effect. At the moment his appearance was as unexplained as by both women it was unexpected.

Needless to say that this sight of Caroline patronizing Vera with pretence of affectionate pleading was to him as unwelcome as surprising.

Grey had not arrived when he left the House. The situation had to stand as it was—those two women and Paul Wordsworth. It might have passed off very quietly—worse rencontres do—but it did not; for which in the first instance the uncourtliness of Paul and the impulsive temperament of Caroline were to blame. She was one of those women to whom in a moment the past becomes the present, and has unlimited powers of again and again stirring the temper to activity as if for the first time.

Caroline drew herself away from Vera with a sweep of her heavy train, and

looked at him insolently as he entered and shut the door.

Vera made the only possible remark: "Mr. Wordsworth—La Marquise Scalchi; but I believe you have met before."

This time he bowed formally. He would have gone but for his intention to have an explanation. He was very angry—angry with Vera also; jumped at the conclusion it was Grey's doing, in which he was correct; and then he said aloud:

"Has Sir Charles come back, Lady Carstairs?"

"I expect him every moment."

"If you will allow me I will wait and see him."

"I think that you did not recollect me to-day," said the marquise, standing before him. "My name is new to you."

“Yes, I did recollect you—perfectly,” he answered briefly.

Caroline was so furious that she could control herself no longer. She had intended to have left them with a word to each of civility, poisoned with innuendo.

“This is the man who——”

Paul interrupted her beginning. Vera had not before known that tone which he took. Afterwards she understood why men who “feared no man,” as they said, were awed by him. Paul had had the advantage of knowing Caroline’s fits of fury.

“I know of old your capacity for making scenes,” he answered. “Pray spare Lady Carstairs now.”

“From all I hear it would be a work of charity to let her know what you are

before it is too late. But I forgot, you are bound to marry her." The venom of her look!

"What do you mean?" thundered Paul. She shrugged her shoulders.

"You are here *now*; you have been called to order by her husband in his lifetime——"

"Are you mad?" interrupted Vera, before Paul could speak. "You! to force yourself into my room to insult me—after your professions, too!"

"*You* know, it seems, what I mean. I did not come here to insult you. Now I am here I will not leave this room till I show you that I, too, can guard myself. You, Mr. Wordsworth, will say, 'No! I will not know that woman!' I will not now know *you*. And if you and your

Lady Carstairs do say one word against me I will publish what I know. What do you say to that?"

"That you may say what you please," began Vera.

"Keep quiet, please. I will answer her."

"Let Lady Carstairs speak; she is a woman, and will know what an insulted woman dare do. You, Mistare Wordsworth, will please be a little quiet. You will hear me."

"You will hear nothing, Vera! unless you tell her *I* can do nothing against a lady; do you wish her to remain in your room, Lady Carstairs?"

"You will put me out? Not till you have heard me; *then* I go!"

"I understand nothing," said Vera.

“What do you mean, madame? This is extraordinary conduct.”

“There can be no question whose conduct is extraordinary. I wish to tell you this only — then I go,” she repeated. “There are two little stories about your conduct, Mr. Paul Wordsworth, one was many years ago ; there is another now. You dare to come to my room before strangers and you say in effect : ‘She was a bad woman who did share my story so long ago.’ *Eh ! bien*,” she says, “another woman shares your story now, and the first woman knows all about that ! What you do to me I do to her—and that is pity for her, she is a poor little thing !”

“Paul !” said Vera. “Is *this*——”

“Yes, it is ‘Caroline.’ You know who that is.”

“He has spoken to you of me? So much the better.”

“Yes, for me,” rejoined Paul. “But I have never told her—never mean to tell her—by what means my friends rescued my letters—my life—from your hands. To-night I met the man who was with me then as a witness. Having seen you this afternoon, I asked him what you had been doing since, and he told me. You are the Marquise Scalchi—a good position is yours *now*. Keep it! Lady Carstairs wishes you good-night.”

“In a minute. Does Lady Carstairs understand if she attempts to injure me I know all her secrets—she would not like them told?”

“I have no secrets.”

“Not about that letter found in your room?”

“What?” said Vera, answering scorn with bewilderment.

“My child, never mind! How you came by your scandal I know not, madame; I can guess, I think. If you like I can name your informant, who was sent out of the country as a proved liar by Sir Ralph Carstairs’ desire. Lady Carstairs knows nothing of the matter; not even that she lost a letter of mine to *you*, which I had put into her hands. This was the ground of the trumped-up accusation to which I see you refer. Are you answered? Your story would fall to the ground. I had no intention of allowing strangers to see our meeting; I thought you were alone. Remember this, Caroline, when a man finds a woman he loved to be what I found you were, if he be a gentle-

man he is indeed silent about her, but also silent *to* her, for ever! But let one breath of scandal arise about my promised wife, traceable to you—it could be traceable to none else—then I keep silence no longer. Till then, I do, *Marquise*.”

“I have knocked again and again,” interrupted Grey. “As I heard you had not left I ventured to come again. Is anything wrong?”

The group were still standing in their dramatic positions.

“I think not,” said Caroline, though her figure was heaving with rage. “I have only to say before I go that you have been kind enough to show me your promised wife; here, Mistare Wordsworth, is my future husband!”

“Have you settled it all? I knew it

would come to that!" exclaimed Grey eagerly to Vera. "I am so awfully glad."

A little later, perhaps, Grey might know the meaning of the triumphant smile of Caroline, but he had taken all differences as settled when he found the trio together, and on Caroline's face was the look of one supremely benevolent.

"Tell them to go," said Vera, suddenly, but she needed not, for, with a keen sense of the dangers of anti-climax, Caroline withdrew. She certainly *withdrew*. The word is appropriate to the histrionic talent shown in that going out.

Vera waited a moment.

Paul began to say, "What, in the name of fortune——"

"The bad, wicked woman!" interrupted

Vera. "To dare to come here, and to speak against us like that!"

The *us* was sufficient for Wordsworth. He sat down beside her. "That woman shall never vex *us* again. Can you trust me? You have seen her now—do you think she has anything to tell you that you wish to hear about me?"

"But why? I don't understand you."

"Quite right. There is a good deal in this little scene, which there is no necessity for you to understand yet. Let us spend a few moments in pleasanter things. You trust me?"

"Need you ask?"

* * * * *

It was not till the next year that the marriage took place, and by that time another betrothal was announced. Sir

Charles Carstairs celebrated his majority with his marriage festivities in the following autumn. He and Anice—*née* Bentley—have a very fair chance of happiness. Charlie has come out of his time of probation very well, and the young bride and bridegroom are, as is always said, “perfectly devoted to each other.”

Did Grey marry the marquise after all?

“Any action of Grey’s,” Paul Wordsworth had once said, “is based on the chance of the moment, rather than on the argument of a month.”

Chance had it here; he married the marquise; but argument estranged him for ever from Wordsworth. The two men quarrelled—as might have been expected under the circumstances—at least, Grey

abused Wordsworth, and Wordsworth would not speak to Grey. It was the marquise—though Grey did not know it, so much must be said for him—who was at the bottom of a semi-public story which a little later gave the Wordsworths much annoyance.

Still, the Wordsworths, in regard to their neighbours, are people who try to act up to their own standard of right and wrong; they make mistakes, but they do not *drift* on any current which sets in. So they could afford to wait.

Perhaps they needed some check to their great and growing happiness, for it was very perfect; though life for them could never be only a search for pleasure, and enjoyment can never be as dreadless to those who have been once troubled.

At the next election Grey Meredith stood again, and was thrown out. Then the Merediths altogether disappeared from the view of the Wordsworths. Across the hills, from another valley of social life, there sometimes floated to the Wordsworths amusing tidings of Grey's being kept in order when he manifested anything of the old propensity to devote himself to any pretty woman with all his heart, for the moment.

The general result of the same election was also to upset the Government, but, for private reasons, neither Paul nor Vera regretted the fact that once more their side were thrown out of office.

"I have indeed been happy ever since our marriage," said Paul Wordsworth, looking proudly at his beautiful young

wife—a very different woman was Mrs. Wordsworth from Lady Carstairs—“but I have more time to enjoy being happy now that we are again in opposition.”

THE END.

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